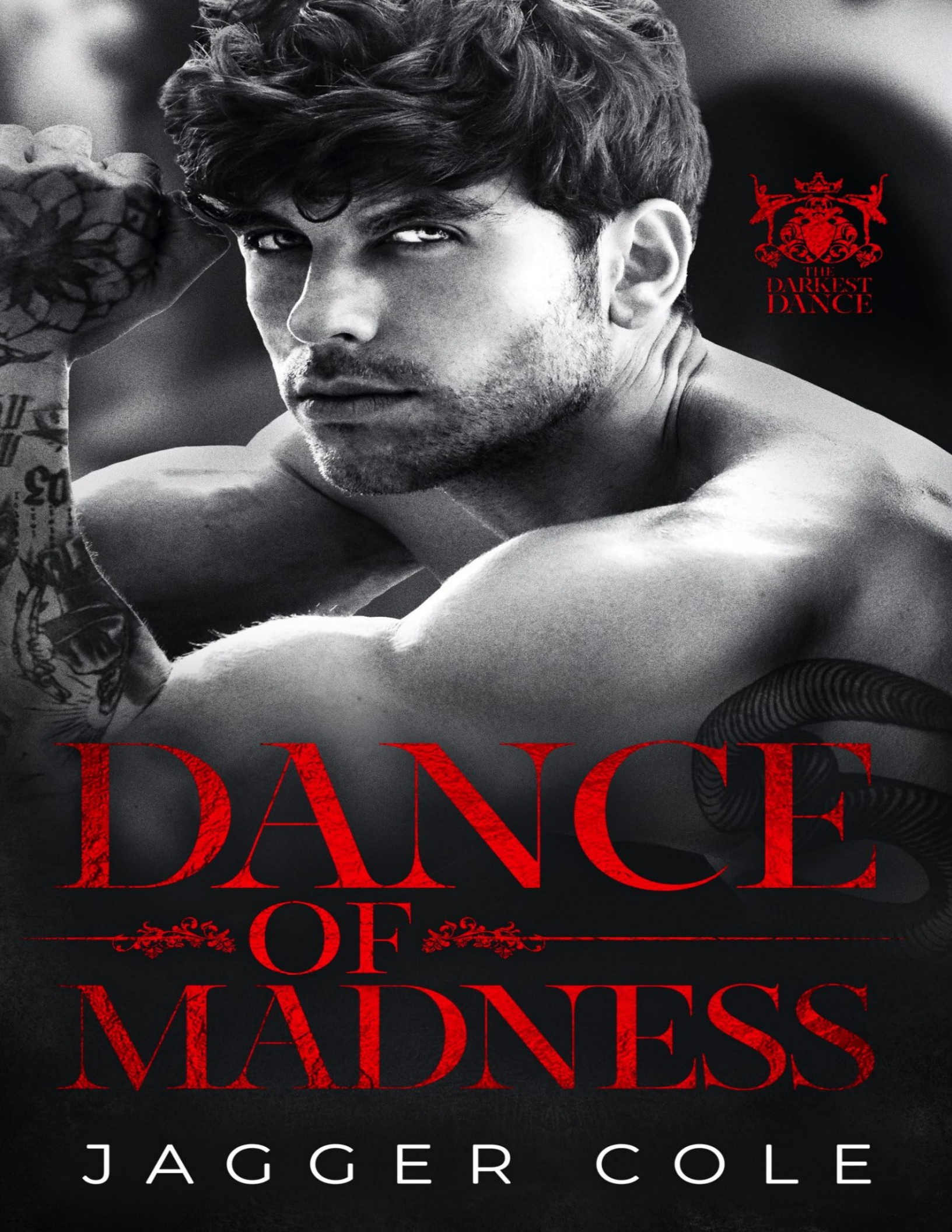
THE DARKEST DANCE
DANCE OF MADNESS
JAGGER COLE

DANCE OF MADNESS

A DARK ENEMIES TO LOVERS MAFIA ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

Dance of Madness
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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book, like many of my books, contains darker, graphic themes. *Dance of Madness* involves CNC scenes, mild BDSM, mild degradation and praise, as well as references to past CSA and trauma.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers and limits, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

Hey,

It's stupid, maybe. But what I'm scared of is not ever being scared. Of not being pushed to the edge. I'm terrified that I'll be halfway through my life before I realize I've only ever done what was expected of me, and none of the things I was told to fear or run from.

Is that just survival instinct? Is wanting to know the fear and the danger of the forbidden a defect I have?

You have my express permission to tell me I sound fucking crazy. Really. Because now that I write this out, I feel like I sound pretty fucking crazy.

Anyway. What are YOU scared of?

-Me

1

MILENA

WHAT THE FUCK were you thinking?

The wind kicks up, like the very air around me is trying to warn me back. Although it's early summer, I find myself hugging my arms around me against a sudden chill, my hands rubbing briskly as I stare up Greymoor Manor, looming over me.

Old. Ivy-covered. Beautiful, in a forgotten sort of way.

And *terrifying*.

Haunted mansions tend to be like that.

Okay…not *actually* haunted. Not in my opinion, at least. I don't believe in ghosts, or the supernatural, or an afterlife, or really religion at all, despite my mother's efforts when I was younger.

Do you need to believe in God to believe in ghosts?

I'm not sure.

Instead of dwelling on the question, I suck my bottom lip between my teeth and lift my eyes up to the old mansion.

Gothic columns, iron railings, stone lions half-eaten by ivy and time. Greymoor Manor perches like a looming gargoyle at the top of Carnegie Hill, partly cloaked in shadows. A former Gilded Age wonder, it's been abandoned since at least the 1980s. Well, *not lived in*. Abandoned would suggest "forgotten". But ever since I can remember, there's been a heavy padlock on the grand front door.

So, not abandoned. Just…closed off.

In middle school, even high school, my friends and I used to dare each other to run past the place. If we were feeling especially reckless—or brave, depending on your point of view—the challenge would escalate to going all the way up to the front door and knocking, which would inevitably conclude with everyone screaming and gigging nervously as we all ran away.

I swallow and ignore the spine-tingling sensation that something is *watching*.

Ghosts aren't real. It's just a fucking old house no one lives in anymore.

I take a step up the wide, cracked front staircase, heels snapping like muffled gunshots. Somewhere behind me, a car passes. Otherwise, it's dead silent.

Not haunted.

This is so fucking stupid.

I'm here because of Alicia. I can't *stand* bullies, and yet I seem unable to back down from them.

And Alicia Houghton is a class-A bully.

…That's a nice way of saying "cunty bitch with a perpetual Regina George mean-girl stick shoved up her ass."

I have no idea how or why she was at the party I just left. Roman—the older brother of Evelina, one of my besties—threw it at their dad's sprawling townhouse on 59th Street, right on the Park. As expected, it was crawling with a who's-who of the young, moneyed, powerful, and mostly Bratva-connected: heirs to various criminal empires, like Evelina and Roman.

Like me.

Evie's dad runs the Nikitin Bratva. Mine runs the Kalishnik Bratva.

Alicia's father is a notorious Wall Street shark, which makes him arguably a bigger criminal than either my Papa *or* Evie's. She was probably only at the party because she's friends with Irina Lenkova, who *is* Bratva-connected.

Alicia and Irina both used to dance with us at the Zakharova up until maybe a year and a half ago, when they both left.

Thank *God*.

And of course it would totally be like Alicia to start an eye-rolling game of Truth or Dare at that party, like we're still in prep school.

I should've known she'd pull something like this. Bullies hate being stood up to, and I made a *career* of standing up to that bitch when she was still dancing with the Zakharova, mainly because she was relentless with both Evelina and our friend Bianca.

Apparently she's remembered that, because the second I was dumb enough to join the stupid game tonight, she lasered right in on me.

"Scared, Milena?" she'd asked, a perfect little smirk painted across her glossed-up lips. "Maybe you should pick truth instead. Wouldn't want to tarnish your tiara or crack those glass slippers."

I chose dare. Of course. My pride is a stupid, reckless thing.

And what was the dare? "Go to Greymoor, alone, tonight."

Take something.

Leave something.

And record myself in the primary bedroom on the third floor saying, "*There's no such thing as monsters.*"

Which brings us to the present, and me standing alone, in my heels, at the front door to the place we used to dare each other to run past, screaming.

I look down at the keypad lock on the front door. Alicia had told me the combination with a smug little glint in her eye, saying a "friend" gave it to her. I have no idea what that's supposed to mean.

But whatever. I'm here. Alicia is still a cunt, and I'm still more than happy to shove her shitty attitude in her face.

Let's do this.

I enter the code.

There's a soft click, as if it's been waiting for me.

I press my palm to the old brass doorknob, twist, then push. My pulse skips as the door opens with a deep, aching creak, before swinging into the darkness within. My nose wrinkles slightly at the smell of rust, cold stone and something else, old and forgotten.

Then I step inside and the door groans shut behind me, swallowing the last of the streetlight.

It's dark in here, with the heavy curtains mostly blocking out the streetlight from outside. I fumble for my phone and turn on the flashlight. A pale beam slices through the dust-choked air, sweeping over the ghostly shapes of furniture covered in old sheets.

The wood floor creaks under my weight when I step forward, sending a ripple up my spine.

Ghosts aren't real. Ghosts aren't real. Ghosts aren't real.

The Gilded Age mansion is *gigantic*. I remember reading once that the old manor is pushing fifteen thousand square feet. Columns line the entrance hall. Wallpaper that looks like it was once ivory and gold peels from the walls in soft curls. A cobwebby chandelier drips crystal from the ceiling like frozen tears.

Lady Greymoor had great taste: great, and *expensive*. Luckily, aside from being by all accounts a *bastard*, Lord Greymoor—

yes, they were an actual Lord and Lady—was grotesquely wealthy.

When he decided to ditch Lady Greymoor for a floozy half her age, his spurned wife took him to the cleaners and used that fuck-you money to build one of the most stately, grandiose mansions of its day in Manhattan.

And it's her bedroom in said grandiose mansion in which I'm supposed to record myself saying "there's no such things as monsters". A socialite from the Gilded Age who married into old money and then disappeared into rumor. Some stories say she went mad. Other, more grotesque ones claim she ended up murdering her ex and his new fling by walling them up in this very house.

Honestly, my bet—my hope—is that Lady Greymoor, God bless her, spent every last dime of that fucker's money on food, wine, fun, and hot Gilded Age boys.

My thoughts on the former owner of the house fade as I drift deeper into it. I step into a grand salon room and slip past a grand piano swaddled in muslin, the yellowing and cracked keys peeking out from under the sheet.

There's something romantic about it all. It's the kind of place where ghosts—should you believe in them—might linger. Not because they're angry, but because they just loved it too much to leave.

I think about Alicia's instructions again: *Take something. Leave something. Say the words.*

Without thinking, I walk over to an old armchair in the corner and sink down onto the sheet covering it. Dust bunnies float into the air like little ballerinas, dancing in the still, heavy air.

For a minute, I consider just *staying put*.

Haunted or not, it's peaceful here, like the world has stopped screaming in your face. No Madame Kuzmina, the artistic director of the Zakharova, telling me to start from the beginning *again*, or to put in more grueling hours perfecting my technique. None of the expectations that come with being the daughter of one of the world's most powerful, feared, and respected Bratva kingpins.

Just me, and this old house.

I push to my feet and trail my fingers along the edge of a console table, tracing through a thick layer of dust. From the salon, I move through a small servants' hallway into the library. It's in here that my brows arch when I lift my eyes to the extra-tall ceiling.

Holy shit.

The shelves stretch from floor to ceiling, carved from dark wood and filled with *hundreds* of books. Maybe a thousand, or more. Most of them are tucked behind glass-paned doors, as if the house is still trying to protect them.

Keep moving. Do the thing and then call Evelina before she freaks out and worries you've been dragged down to Hell by an evil spirit.

I might not believe in ghosts. But Evelina, my wonderful if *extremely* sheltered and superstitious friend, believes enough for both of us, and was positively beside herself that I took this dumb dare tonight.

I turn to leave the library and find the stairs to Lady Greymoor's old bedroom, then pause.

It's like a compulsion at this point. I simply *cannot* be in a room full of books and *not* look for it. And, come on: if a copy of a certain 1700's book from the Sturm and Drang period of German literature is going to be anywhere, I would bet that a place like this is it.

Before I can convince myself to just drop it, I'm already at one of the massive shelves, scanning the spines of the old leatherbound books. Seriously, there's at least a thousand books here. Mercifully, I realize pretty fast that they're alphabetized by author.

I trace my finger over another shelf, with the "G" names.

…Wait.

Everything else in the house is covered in dust. But the bookshelves, even the ones not behind glass doors—like this one—aren't.

It's as if the books themselves are old, but haven't actually been *here* that long. As if someone placed them here recently…

A shiver licks up my spine.

Don't be ridiculous.

I shake the thought away and keep tracing over the spines until I come to a sudden halt at *G-O-E*.

Goethe. As in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, author of the famous line "be bold, and mighty forces will come to your aid."

Why yes, I *am* a huge fucking dork, thank you for asking.

And right there under my finger is the very book I was curious about finding here: *The Sorrows of Young Werther.*

I whisper the title out loud like it's a secret.

It's an old edition, the leather binding dry and cracked. I slide it out gently, almost reverently.

I'll admit, it's…*weird* for your favorite book to be a super moody and emo German book from the late seventeen hundreds. Especially one written in epistolary fashion—as in, a series of letters. And, yes, if I picked it up for the first time *now*, it might not even be in my top one hundred books.

But this book came to me at a perfectly wrecked time in my life. I was fifteen and my mom had just died when our English professor at prep school assigned it. Where everyone else bitched and moaned about it, I ended up curling up in the corner of the ballet studio after class every day and *devouring* it.

It was the first thing that made the ache in my chest feel understood.

Take something. Leave something.

I feel a brief pang of guilt, but then shake it off. Is it even stealing if no one's lived here for at least eighty years?

I decide that it's not, and in the same instant, I decide that I'm taking this book home with me today.

Finding the book, though, is only the first part of my compulsion when it comes to dear Werther and his sorrowful, weepy letters. I swallow, hesitating, like I'm gearing up to yank off a present's wrapping paper on Christmas morning.

I'm just about to open the cover to see if it's written on the first page when a sound cuts through the silence.

Creak.

A dagger made of ice plunges into my heart. I whirl, clamping the book shut as my eyes stab into the darkness, a gasp choking in my throat.

There's nothing there.

No *one*…

"Hello?" I call softly.

Right, like ghosts are going to respond.

Not that you believe in them…

The hair on my arms lifts in the ensuing silence. My heart slams against my chest as I sweep the flashlight toward the doorway.

Still nothing.

I swallow, tucking the book more tightly under my arm. Time to finish this dumb dare and go home.

It was just the house settling, or the wind, I tell myself as my footsteps echo through the empty house.

Empty.

I say it twice more in my head in an attempt to ground myself and shake off the cold sensation finger-walking up my spine.

I grip the book tighter, fingers pressing into the leather spine as I step carefully out of the library. I don't run up the stairs to take the video. I'm damned if I'll give Alicia the satisfaction of hearing that I'm out of breath when I record it.

The grand staircase curves upward in a soft spiral, each step creaking faintly under my weight as I climb. Every sound feels amplified in here: my own breathing, the quiet scrape of my heels on the stairs. I feel like I'm walking through someone else's memory.

Halfway up, I pause and glance behind me into the darkness below.

Yeah, 'cause that's always a good idea, idiot.

Of course, there's still nothing there. Just the library door, hanging open like a dark, waiting maw.

I turn and keep going.

I skip the second floor and go straight to the third. At the top, the wide hallway is lined with cracked sconces and faded portraits. The paint has peeled from the ceiling in delicate curls, same as the wallpaper on the first floor.

Then I see what must be the double doors to Lady Greymoor's bedchamber.

The wood is darker than in the rest of the house—heavy mahogany, with a carved crest I don't recognize. A woman's face is etched in profile, wreathed in thorns.

As much as I hate to admit it, I *am* a little freaked out right now. But somehow, seeing her *wreathed face* carved into her bedroom door in the giant-ass mansion she bought with her prick of an ex-husband's money brings a smile to my face.

I think Lady Greymoor and I would have gotten along swimmingly.

I hesitate at the double doors, hand hovering near the knob.

Take something, leave something, say the words.

As in, let's get this over with.

My heart's pounding as I open the door.

Inside, the air is cooler and a bit more stagnant. The room is enormous, the ceiling arching high above, the windows hidden behind thick velvet curtains.

A mirror, warped with age, hangs across from the bed. I catch my reflection in it when I turn to face it: my face is paler, my eyes a little wider than I thought they would be.

I feel like I'm intruding.

Weirdly, the bed is actually *made*—the sheets, quilt, blankets and pillowcases are still there from whenever the house finally shut its front door. And like the bookshelves downstairs, they aren't covered in dust, or faded with age.

They look like someone made this bed not long ago.

Somewhere in the house, a sound crackles through the darkness, and my blood turns cold.

Just a step creaking. A wall settling, that's all.

…Maybe the wind?

My throat tightens as icy fingers curl around my heart.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

My hand trembles as I lift my phone again. The flashlight reflects off the mirror, making the room look twice as large. Twice as empty.

I switch to the camera and take a deep breath.

Just say it and leave.

I lift the phone to my face. My lips feel stiff, like they've forgotten how to form words. I stop the recording, take another shaky breath, then hit the record button again.

"*There's no such thing as monsters*," I manage to choke out, throwing in a sarcastic eye roll for Alicia's benefit before I smirk

at the camera. “There’s no such thing as monsters,” I say again, the unnerving feeling of earlier melting away.

Good, now I can get the actual *fuck* out of—

“That’s where you’re wrong, little princess.”

The voice cuts through the dark like a blade.

Low. Rough. Amused.

My body locks up.

“They very much *do* exist.”

2

MILENA

I GO COMPLETELY STILL.

My skin prickles. My pulse stutters. My lungs forget how to pull in air. For a split second, I think maybe I imagined it.

Then the shadows…move.

A figure detaches from the far corner of the room—tall, broad, and wearing a matte black mask bearing the visage of a freaking *wolf*.

I scream, and just as the nightmare lunges at me, my survival instinct kicks in. I turn and bolt, my heel catching the edge of the rug, my breath leaving my chest in sharp, terrified sobs as I shove through the bedroom door and into the hall.

Footsteps thunder behind me.

Fast.

He's coming after me.

I bolt down the stairs, almost tripping over my feet before I catch myself and hurl myself down a hallway. It's only after I do so that I remember the bedroom was on the *third* floor, not the second, which means I just got off at the wrong stop.

Too late to fix that now.

I can hear his shoes slamming on the floor, gaining on me with every breath. I run faster, the clicks of the heels of my shoes bouncing off the old walls like staccato war drums.

"I told you not to wear heels, princess," he calls after me, his voice half-amused, half-feral, and *all* terror-inducing. "They don't exactly scream *survival* to me."

Survival.

What the *fuck* have I walked into?!

My heart is hammering in my throat. The corridor blurs past me, streaks of warped wallpaper and crumbling molding. I have no idea where I'm going—just *away*.

From the beast charging after me through the darkness. From the madness threatening to pull me down into oblivion.

A bookcase appears out of nowhere. I dodge it at the last second, but my shoulder clips the edge. Pain blooms sharp down my arm, but I don't care. I *can't* care right now.

This was just supposed to be a dare. A joke.

Some creepy-ass house and a quick video.

Not a man. Not *this*.

I round a corner, nearly slipping on the hardwood, tweaking my ankle.

Behind me, the footsteps pause.

I freeze, my ears straining, every hair on my skin standing on edge.

The sudden silence is somehow even worse than the chase. It's like my breathing is suddenly too loud. Like my goddamn pulse is thudding in my veins at such a volume that people two blocks away will know where the fuck I am.

I tense and go utterly still against the wall.

Then I hear it again—slow. Measured. Deliberate.

Not the footsteps of someone chasing, though.

Someone *hunting*.

"And *blonde*…?" The rasping, deeply masculine voice slices through the darkness and teases over my skin like knives. "I seem to recall you told me you were a brunette. However did you know that blondes are my favorite fucking *meal*."

I'm in a horror movie. It's the only explanation. A real-life horror movie, and now some fucking psycho in a mask is going to chase me down in a haunted house and *eat me*.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how that blonde ponytail looks wrapped around my fist while I watch you choke and gag on my cock."

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Hide all you want, princess," the feral voice growls. "The suspense is just making me *harder*."

I choke down a whimper that threatens to escape my lips, strangling it in my throat. But not quite enough.

The man chuckles darkly.

"Come on, princess," he murmurs quietly. "You fucking *asked* for this."

When I hear the creak of a floorboard, I bolt again, ignoring the pain in my ankle, my pulse exploding in my veins.

"*Yessss*," the monster groans, his footsteps pounding after me as a fresh scream curdles in my chest. "*Run*, little princess," he snarls. "Fucking *RUN* for me."

I reach the end of the hall and yank open a door—

It's a fucking *linen closet*.

I slam it shut and whirl, throwing myself down another hallway, my heart threatening to claw its way out of my chest. The hallway splits left and right. I haven't a clue which way leads to freedom: I blindly choose right and sprint forward, half-limping.

This is all wrong. It's not just him, not just the terror I never anticipated. It's that one of us seems to be playing a game that was planned, and the other is just running for her fucking life.

Then it hits me.

He thinks I'm someone else.

He thinks I'm fucking ALICIA.

The horrible realization of exactly what that bitch-cunt set me up for tonight hits like a knife to the stomach. But I don't have time to digest how *utterly fucked* it is that she sent me into this, not now.

I don't have time for anything but *survival*.

I slam through another door and find myself in what used to be a ballroom. Moonlight filters in through shattered windows. Dust motes swirl in the air. Another grand piano sits broken in one corner, like a corpse.

I only get ten steps across the floor before I hear the door to the ballroom bang open behind me, and the beast comes spilling into the room like black ink.

I spin to run, but it's too late.

A hand slams across my mouth from behind, muffling the curdling scream that tears from my throat. The sheer weight of him—powerful, muscled, and hard—slams into my back, tipping me forward until I go crashing into the piano.

Everything goes numb. The taste of copper floods my mouth, and sheer panic surges through my system as he brutally slams me forward over the piano.

I scream bloody murder into his hand, fighting and kicking, trying to shove him off me. But he's too strong. Too powerful.

Too all-consuming.

Suddenly, his hand is grabbing the back of my skirt and yanking it up over my ass.

"This isn't what we agreed to," he growls.

"You have the wrong person!" I scream into his hand. "I'm not her!"

It only comes out as muffled, garbled nonsense against the iron hand clamped over my mouth.

"You were supposed to be naked," the monster rumbles darkly. "Allow me to *fix that*."

He's completely heedless of my hands flailing and clawing behind me as he grabs the back of my panties and *tears* them down my thighs.

I scream as the cool air hits my skin. My legs tremble.

And yet…

Somewhere deep inside me, something rotten, secret, and shameful is responding.

Traitorously.

Obscenely.

Horrifically.

It's not this *exact* scenario. But there's enough elements of it that the deranged darkness inside me ignites.

The hands on me, taking my power away.

The taste of fear in my mouth, and the smell of unbridled arousal in the air.

The feel of bulging, uncaring, unmerciful muscles pinning me and taking complete control, heedless of my wants or feelings on the matter.

What the fuck is wrong with me.

Fantasy isn't *this,* not really.

Not with an actual stranger. Not with a masked fucking *psycho* in a derelict mansion.

"Let's see how fucking wet and messy this little pussy got running from me. And I'd hope it's *really* fucking wet, princess, for your sake…"

He shoves his hand between my thighs, and something in me *snaps*.

My hold on reality, maybe.

A gut instinct to survive.

I will *not* let this happen.

Just as he leans over me, I drive my elbow back into his ribs. Hard.

The monster grunts in pain. His grip loosens—not all the way, but enough.

My pulse roars as I whirl and slam my knee up into his crotch.

"FUCK!" He roars madly, groaning as he stumbles back a step. I grit my teeth and send a swift, well-aimed *grand battement* into his balls.

He makes a sound that's half-fury, half-pain as he drops to his knees.

I don’t wait.

I fucking *run*.

Down the hall. Along another corridor. Past shrouded furniture and musty old portraits, and finally down the stairs.

Cool night air blasts me in the face as I stagger out the front door of Greymoor Manor, leaving it hanging open as I half-fall down the steps into the street.

My ankle is on fire. My legs barely work.

But I flat-out run down the block, catching sight of a cab pulling up at the corner to drop some passengers off. I scream and wave, charging at it like a maniac and probably terrifying the two guys who are getting out of the back seat before I dive inside and slam the door shut.

“Drive!” I choke. “Anywhere—just *go*!”

The cab peels away from the curb, tires screeching.

It’s only when we’re half a block away that I look back.

The mansion stands silent. The steps are empty.

The front door is closed again.

No sign of a monster in a wolf mask.

…Just the lingering electric tingle where his hands clamped over my mouth and touched my skin.

I exhale hard, and then start laughing for some weird, deranged reason: quiet, unhinged laughter that has no humor in it at all.

Take something. Leave something. Say the words.

I said the words and got them on video, though I didn't take the fucking book. It was dropped somewhere during that mad, insane chase.

I did leave something behind, though.

My sanity.

3

THE WOLF

My fucking balls ache.

For two distinct reasons: one, getting kneed and then high-kicked in the fucking family jewels. And two?

They've been blue as *fuck* since that blood-boiling chase last night.

And I don't mean because of the aforementioned kneeing and kicking.

I shift in the velvet chair, stretching my legs out in front of me. The wolf mask presses against my skin, making me feel uncharacteristically hot and claustrophobic, but I don't take it off. Not in here.

Not in Court.

Smoke coils up from a nearby candle. Somewhere across the vast cathedral space, a woman moans in pleasure, followed by the groan of a man as he joins her in ecstasy. If I gave enough of a shit to focus right now, I'd probably hear a lot more moaning and groaning and cries of pleasure.

I mean, I don't want to call it an *orgy*, but the parties we throw before the Black Court is in session can really only be described as…okay, yeah, an orgy.

Couples, threesomes and moresomes, plus plenty of solo voyeurs, are sitting or otherwise draped over the numerous chaises, couches, beds, and chairs on one side of the underground cathedral space where we hold Court.

It's always nice to have some *fun* before the judgment begins.

But tonight, I'm not in the mood. Well, I'm *never* quite in the "mood" for what's going on around me right now, even here. And that's one of the reasons I'm…*conflicted* about last night's chase.

A chase is a chase. A hunt is a hunt, and it's the thrill of that hunt that drives me to seek it out. I don't know, I could get obnoxiously introspective and say it's my "darkness" or my "brokenness" or blah-blah-blah-just-fucking-*no*.

I suppose I *do* have a way of looking at the world in a more, shall we say, savage light. Maybe even what some would politely call an *unhinged* light. But hey—it's not like I'm Carmine or anything.

As if on cue, my eye catches sight of my Hound-masked friend across the room. Obviously, he's not indulging in the moaning and groaning and cries of pleasure. That never really was his thing anyway, but the odds of him indulging in any of that went catapulting into the stratosphere when he became a married man.

Case in point: he's barely looking at the bodies writhing on the beds and couches. Instead, he's sitting to one side, talking with The Raven and The Bull.

Nico glances over at me as if sensing my presence, nodding his winged mask before returning his attention to whatever he and his brother are talking about with The Bull.

Nico thinks I'm like his brother. Or, as he puts it, "Carmine-adjacent".

I don't know… Maybe I am. But I'm *not* a fucking psycho, and as much as I love the guy, Carmine is fucking *certifiable* in that regard.

But as for me? *No estoy loco*.

I'm not crazy, or a psychopath. Unhinged, hiding a darkness or…whatever.

I'm just *me*.

But…as I was saying… A hunt is a hunt. And it's the *hunt* that drives me. The catching part is…well, *part of it*. But it's not what you'd think, as an onlooker.

Last night was different, though.

I waited. I chased. I caught. And then, I wanted fucking *more*.

Then I got kicked in the fucking nuts, and by the time I'd shoved down the urge to puke or whimper like a little bitch on the floor, the reason that I "wanted more" was gone.

A very specific reason, with long legs.

Blonde hair.

Big, innocent and yet fiery blue eyes.

And a goddamn *mean* high kick.

Milena Kalishnik.

The name crackles in my skull like a match catching tinder.

I never exchanged names or real identities with the girl who messaged me via the Club Venom app. I mean, that's sort of the whole fucking point. Like-minded users with, shall we say, more *primal* needs and urges make profiles, describe what they want, and then the system puts you in touch with each other—basically, Tinder for the dark and deviant.

I've used it a dozen other times for a dozen other hunts. This one was supposed to be no different.

Said she had a chase kink and wanted to try primal play. She even expressed a desire for some consensual non-consent stuff.

Check, check and *check*.

She said all the right things; told me how she fantasized about being hunted, caught, taken against her will. That she *wanted it*, that very fucking night, and could be ready within the hour.

But I never take them at their word, not until I see them run.

Fantasy's easy enough to write from behind the safety of a screen. But when the dark is real, and the terror is pounding hot on their heels, ready to snatch them from the shadows, most girls freeze. Reality destroys that little fantasy.

There are tears. They plead.

That's when I stop, tell them they've wasted my fucking time, and send them packing.

I'm there to chase, not to be a fucking coach. Not to *teach them*.

I mean, Christ. Figure out your kinks on your own fucking time.

So I messaged her back. Asked all the pertinent questions. Made it abundantly clear what this was.

I explained she'd be coming to Greymoor Manor. I've owned it for the last four years because one, it's an excellent location for my…*tastes*. But two—I mean, come on. It's a fucking *haunted mansion*. That's cool as fuck.

So I went. I waited in the bedroom upstairs, as we'd discussed, listening to the sound of my prey entering quietly via the code I gave her. I listened to her creep around the house and then—loudly—clomp her way up the stairs.

Why do *so many of them* arrive in fucking *heels*?

But then, things went sideways. I knew there was something off the second she stepped into the room.

I told myself the girl who seemed too elegant, too proud, and the wrong *kind* of reckless was simply wearing a blonde wig. Or else had, for whatever reason, lied about being a brunette in her profile.

I chased her anyway, because I was already in that place where I let the savage part of me take the reins. But then, two strange

things happened.

One, I caught her.

That's not the strange part. Of fucking course I caught her.

But two, when I did, *I didn't stop*.

I didn't let go and tell her the hunt was over, that it was time for her to leave.

I kept going.

I hungered.

I *fucking wanted her*.

Then she whirled around and kicked me in the balls, and I saw her face.

Milena.

Daughter of Marko Kalishnik, and a certified Bratva princess. Royalty in stilettos—or pointe shoes, depending on the time of day. We don't run in quite the same circles, but we do exist in parallel ones. She dances with Carmine's wife Lyra, Nico's new one-and-only Naomi, and their sister Bianca in the Zakharova Ballet company. I've seen her enough times to know the curve of her mouth, the sharpness in her glare.

To me, she's always looked like she was born thinking she deserved a crown.

But last night, she looked like something else entirely.

Soft. Wild. *Unhinged*.

She ran like frightened prey. *Squirmed* like frightened prey when I caught her. And when I had her bent over that piano with my hand over her mouth and her panties in my fist—I felt it. Not fear.

Need.

Maybe hers…but definitely mine.

And I *let her go*.

Okay, that's not quite fair. She "got away." My bruised fucking balls are certainly the main reason for that. But it was also that I was simply too stunned to act. For the first time in years, I *hesitated*.

Now, I can't stop thinking about her. About the heat of her skin. The sound she made when I pinned her. The scent she left behind on my fingers.

She's gotten under my skin. Into my blood.

And I don't like it, not one fucking bit.

Grinding my teeth, I snatch my phone out of my pocket, tap on the Club Venom app, and bring up my conversation with the girl I was *supposed to* be hunting last night, who was certainly *not* Milena fucking Kalishnik.

There's even a fucking message from her—the other girl—waiting for me.

DANCEGIRLNYC

Did you have fun with your surprise? :P

DANCEGIRLNYC

Did she cry, lol?

My brows furrow behind my wolf mask. *Speaking of psychopaths…*

I glare at my phone as I type out a brutal reply.

THEMADKING

I don't appreciate having my time wasted. At ALL. You have no idea who I am, what I'm capable of, or the kind of power I wield. If I discover who you are, I will pluck you out of whatever pathetic life you live and burn it to the ground while making you watch. My advice would be to delete this fucking app and stop playing tourist in a world you clearly have no clue about.

Then I block her profile and close the app, a smirk playing over my lips.

I'm not going to do any of that psycho shit. But people like that need to be scared shitless. They *deserve* to be.

…Also, it's fun.

A presence materializes next to me, bringing me back to the here and now. I glance up to see the clawed, wide black antlers of The Stag's mask as he looms over me.

Okay, if we want to talk "Carmine-adjacent", I mean…

Ding ding fucking ding.

The Stag is one of my oldest friends. All the Court fuckers are. It's how all this insane shit started. The five of us—all sons and heirs of major crime families—attended Knightsblood University together. To some, Knightsblood is known as the "Harvard of the mafia world". To others, it's "mafia Hogwarts". Honestly, I like that one better.

It was there that the five of us first donned the masks and held our first adjudication as The Black Court. Since then, we've become the stuff of legend.

The leading families that run the underworld of this city—mine included—have limitations. They have the loyalty of their men and soldiers to think about when dealing with traitors or broken contracts. They have their business interests to consider.

As the Black Court, we *don't*.

Some call us vigilantes. I'm sure others have far more colorful and sneered names for us, and I truly could not give less of a fuck.

We are what we are—and what we are is *necessary*. We keep order when order can't otherwise reasonably be kept. We enforce the basic laws of our world—the underworld—because without those laws, it's just chaos.

And as much as I love chaos, I would prefer not to live in *complete* anarchy.

So even if The Stag *does* creep me out a little at times, and even if I haven't the slightest fucking clue how he spends his nights when he's not with me—at Court or otherwise—he's still one of my best friends. Like a brother.

"That time?" I grunt.

He nods slowly, slipping his glass beneath his mask to knock back the last of the whiskey in it. "That time," he murmurs back.

"You wanna tell Bull that?" I smirk under my mask as I turn and nod with my chin to where our large friend is sprawled on a couch with three half-naked women crawling all over him. "The three of them fighting over who gets to blow him first might impede the proceedings *slightly*."

The Stag grunts. "It's not the pussy I'm worried about."

I'd follow his blank look through the dark eyeholes of his stag mask, but I already know where he's staring: at the large glass of whiskey in the Bull's hand.

"He's fine. He's in control," I say as I stand from my seat.

"For now," Stag adds dryly.

That's fair. And a conversation that needs to be had sooner rather than later. But right now, like he said, it's time for The Black Court to be in session.

"Just ring the bell," I toss back. "Let's do this."

The Stag nods, dropping the subject of The Bull's fondness for alcohol as he heads toward the other side of the room, where the raised dais sits, five thrones on it.

What? Dramatics are fun.

At the sound of the bell tolling through the underground cathedral, dull and ancient, the entire scene changes. A few couples pick up the pace to finish what they were doing. But most of them know that when that bell sounds, it's time to stop…well… fucking around, and pay attention to the real reason we're here.

Adjudication.

All of us, even The Bull, leave whatever we were doing and move to the dais, sitting on our thrones as the crowd fills the chairs before us.

Between us and them there's a large stone circle set into the ground, and to one side of *that* sits a table laden with all sorts of menacing-looking instruments of pain: knives, bats, swords, hatchets, hammers…even an old pair of dueling pistols—fucking *dueling* pistols—that have been used exactly once in all the years we've been doing this.

It wasn't even me that got to use them, fuck you very much, Carmine.

As if sensing my glare, The Hound clears his throat and raps a gavel on the long table in front of us.

"The Black Court is now in session," he growls. "Bring in the accused."

Tonight's a fun one, and not just because it's my turn to carry out judgement. The Mori-kai yakuza family, primarily based in Tokyo and Kyoto, are moving more operations into New York. Tonight's fuckwad is a captain who pledged loyalty—with a damn blood marker, no less—to Kenzo Mori, but instead of following Kenzo's orders and setting up Mori-kai operations here in the city, our star of the evening decided to try and sell his boss out to the fucking Triads.

This is *important.* And yet as Carmine recites his crimes out loud, all I can think about is her.

Milena Kalishnik, with her perfect little mouth, running like she wanted me to catch her.

I shift again in my seat uncomfortably.

Balls: still swollen and sore.

Dick: still fucking hard.

No matter. Right now, I've got blood to spill.

The accused is dragged in, flanked by two Court guards. He's young, fairly clean-cut, and makes the usual show of bravado, struggling and hurling threats.

If he only knew. His little tantrum barely ranks in the bottom twenty percent of what I've seen. Trust me, I have seen some *tirades* in this Court.

I lean forward, elbows on the table, and study him from behind the snarling face of my wolf mask as he's shoved to the ground in the middle of the stone circle. When he looks up at us, all the macho bluster from a few seconds ago melts away.

Yeah, five dudes in creepy-ass blank black animal masks sitting in an underground cathedral looking like something out of *Eyes Wide Shut* will do that.

"Riku Kaito," Nico says solemnly from behind his Raven mask, "you stand accused of breaking a blood marker—a sacred oath that forms the very foundation of the underworld we all call home. We exist in a world of broken laws, but a blood marker is the one law we must not break, because without it there is chaos."

Yeah, I've heard this a couple hundred times at this point.

Nico clears his throat and then glances toward me.

Time to play.

"You came to New York," I say slowly, "to oversee Mori-kai operations. You were entrusted with territory, men, and given discretion to act as you saw fit."

He nods quickly. "Y-yes," he stammers. "I-I was. I still—"

"You were caught," I cut in, "communicating with the Red Lanterns, a rival Triad syndicate."

His mouth opens, then closes again. Fear curdles in his eyes.

"You plotted to sell Kenzo Mori out. Whether it was for power or money," I shrug, "it doesn't matter. Because now you stand accused, ready for adjudication." I turn toward Carmine. "Hound?"

"Guilty."

The Raven is next. "Guilty," he echoes his brother.

"*Guilty*," I say in slight sing-song voice, my lips pulling into a grin behind the mask. It's almost time for my favorite part.

The Bull grunts another "guilty", followed by one more from The Stag.

I'm grinning as I turn to face the prisoner again.

"You have been adjudicated and found guilty by this Court."

Riku is shaking as I stand from my throne and slowly step off the dais, walking around and stepping into the stone circle with him.

"Now, you have a choice…" My arm indicates the table full of goodies. "Fight?"

Please say it. Pick the fucking dueling pistols, you fucking prick. Do it.

"Or…flight?"

I turn and point to a stone archway across the floor, with ominous shadows and flickering candlelight beyond it.

The labyrinth.

Every guilty person who is sentenced by the Court is given this choice: they can choose to fight and pick their weapon. Or they can choose *flight* and try to outrun one of us through the labyrinth.

Unsurprisingly, flight is my favorite. Although those dueling pistols…

"Wh-what's in there?" he croaks, staring in horror at the archway.

"Possibly a way out?" I shrug. "Possibly your death?"

Probably his death.

…*Definitely* his death.

"Fight or flight," I mutter again, growing impatient.

He blinks. "I—I'm not sure I understand—"

"*Choose*. You can fight me. One-on-one. If you survive, you walk out of here."

His jaw works restlessly as he tries to size me up.

"*Or*," I continue, "you can run into the labyrinth. You get a head start. And I hunt you."

His face drains of color.

The maze only has one exit. I know every dead end. Every turn.

I mean, I did *design* the damn thing.

Riku glances back at the table of weapons, and his throat bobs again before he glances back at the maze.

"F-flight," he whispers.

Hoo-fucking-ray. I smile behind the mask, a savage, teeth-baring grin that stretches wide.

Dueling pistols can come another day.

I live for this part.

The kill isn't the thrill.

The *hunt* is.

Riku whimpers as the guards grab him and drag him over to the stone archway and the twisting black emptiness of stone and torchlight beyond.

He looks back one last time as I roll my neck.

"I'll give you twenty seconds," I call out as he disappears through the entrance, then shrug off my jacket.

I do my best to shove all thoughts of Milena Kalishnik and the way she got under my fucking skin last night out of my head.

Then madness surges through my veins, and I run.

I catch and kill Riku in a matter of seventy seconds.

But Milena?

She stays in my head *long* after that.

Because that particular hunt has only just begun…

4

MILENA

I CAN'T STOP THINKING about him.

It's been *days*. And although my usual routine already involves pushing my body to the limit in rehearsal, it's been overdrive since that night.

I've doubled my time in the studio, demanding more of myself and sweating my ass off until my reflection in the mirror looks like a ghost barely clinging to the body it once inhabited.

And still he's there.

The man in the wolf mask at Greymoor Manor.

In my head. Under my skin.

In every breath, invading every thought.

I replay the way he materialized from the dark, as if his entire purpose was to consume me. The way his voice ensnared me before his hands did. The way he chased me.

Worse, the way I *responded* to that chase. Yes, there was panic. Yes, I was in sheer survival mode when I was running away. But days later, my sick mind refuses to let me get off that easily.

It wasn't *just* fear or the survival instinct coursing through my veins as I ran through that dark house. It wasn't just a need to escape as I felt him close in behind me.

There was…something else.

And that *something else* might be a whole lot like "excitement".

A thrill. A diseased, toxic desire, like a gnawing hunger I've always denied myself.

When he grabbed me, the entire world narrowed to the pressure of his hand over my mouth; the hardness of his muscled body at my back, the rasping sound of his breath at my ear.

I should've been terrified. I *was* terrified.

But I was also—

God, I can't even say it.

I sink deeper into the plié, ignoring the way my thighs burn. Good. Pain is clean. Pain is pure. Pain has nothing to do with masked men and a fucked-up desire to be chased and caught, and the sickening ache that's suddenly been living between my legs.

I breathe deep. Hold. Release.

Out of the corner of my eye, my reflection shifts, and for a moment, I swear I see something in the mirror behind me.

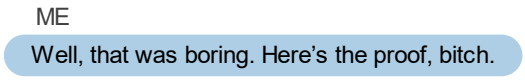
A black mask. A wolf.

I blink, but then it's gone.

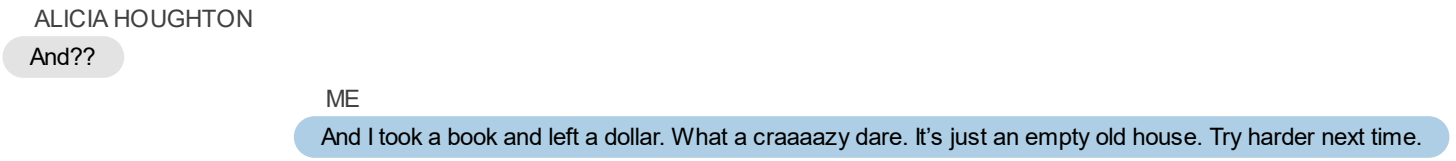
Get a hold of yourself, psycho.

My fingers clench the barre so hard my knuckles go white.

When I got home the other night—*home*, not back to the party—all I did was text Alicia the stupid video of me saying "there's no such thing as monsters" along with a quick message:



She replied almost instantly.


ALICIA HOUGHTON
And??
ME
And I took a book and left a dollar. What a craaaazy dare. It's just an empty old house. Try harder next time.

I watched the three dots appear and disappear multiple times before they finally went away, like she'd been trying to figure out what the hell to say to me and then gave up.

Like she was annoyed. Like she expected more.

That's when I knew, with complete certainty, that she'd sent me there *on purpose*.

Which is…insane.

I mean, Alicia's been a class-A bitch and an absolute cunt since we were in prep school together. She was a total menace during her time at the Zakharova, and we *definitely* butted heads over her being a mean-girl bully to my friends more than once.

But sending me to a house where she clearly *knew* a masked man was going to chase me and apparently *assault me*—something she herself probably set up—is fucking *ridiculous*.

It's insane enough that I'm tempted to tell Papa. He'd rain down hellfire on Alicia and probably everyone she knows. Which is comforting and more than a little satisfying to think about.

But I'm not going to do that.

I fight my own battles. More importantly, tattling to Daddy means admitting to Alicia that her plan worked, and I *refuse* to do that.

It's way more satisfying to let her think her insane trap failed.

Even beyond that, there's another thought that sticks in my head like glue: if I confront her, it makes it real.

Not just the fear and the danger—the other part. The one that lurks and lingers underneath the surface.

The dark thoughts. The nervous, eager yearning.

The demented spark of arousal that came with the adrenaline and the fear.

I'm not ready to acknowledge that yet. Not even when I wake up at night with my hand between my thighs and his voice in my ear.

There's no such thing as monsters.

…Except for the one that's living inside me.

"Did I hear you broke into a house the other night?"

Brooklyn's voice shakes me out of my little black hole of thoughts and I turn to see her eyeing me dubiously with her arms folded over her chest.

"What?"

My gaze shifts from Brooklyn to Evelina, who's standing next to her. Evie's face immediately goes crimson, same as it does if you mention words like "sex", "cock", or "blowjob" anywhere remotely in her vicinity.

“I didn’t—” Her shoulders sag. “I didn’t say you *broke in*, I just mentioned—”

“Jesus, Evie,” Val chuckles throatily as he walks up behind the two of them and slings his muscled, tattooed arms affectionately over their shoulders. “How does the daughter of a literal crime boss end up as such a nun?”

Brooklyn laughs. Evelina’s lips twist as her face heats even redder. “I am *not!*”

“Cum slut.”

I swear, the poor girl’s whole face turns a shade of near-purplish-red.

“I rest my case.” He grins salaciously, shrugging his lean, sculpted shoulders.

“Give me a break!” she mutters back. “Anyone would blush if you blurted *porn* words into their ear.”

Val cocks a brow, then switches his attention to Brooklyn. He clears his throat dramatically and then leans closer. “Cum. Slut. Cock. Pussy. Facial. Anal. Gangbang. Good girl.”

In fairness, there *is* a slight change to Brooklyn’s otherwise composed expression when he says that last one, but it’s gone pretty quick, and Val doesn’t seem to notice it before he turns back to poor Evie.

“Yep, nice theory, but no dice. The convent awaits, baby girl.”

Evelina rolls her eyes as she escapes from under Val’s arm.

“Whatever,” she mutters, still blushing.

“Aww, c’mere,” I grin, pulling her close and wrapping an arm protectively around her. “Leave my Evie alone, Val,” I say with dramatic bravado. “We *like* her sweet and innocent.”

“I am *not*—”

“You one thousand percent are,” I correct her with a sharp brow and a grin. “But…again… It’s why we love you.”

She pouts. “I still didn’t tell them you *broke in*.”

“Hmm. Entering a locked building that isn’t yours is, you know, by most definitions…” Brooklyn eyes me significantly.

I roll my eyes. “It was a stupid dare.”

“So we heard.” She scowls. “How *is* Cunty McCunt-face, anyway?”

Needless to say, not many tears were shed with Alicia announced she’d be quitting the company. More like boo-fucking-hoo, and good riddance. Alicia and her equally shitty friend Irina, who left at the same time, were both *very* talented, but they lacked that thing that all great dancers need, even more than practiced, precise movement: *heart*.

“Eh, still a walking yeast infection,” I shrug.

Brooklyn snorts. Val tosses his head back and hoots out a loud laugh.

“So you *did* break into Greymoor Manor?”

I sigh. “Guys, I didn’t *break in*. Alicia gave me the front door lock combo.”

Val frowns. “How'd she get that?”

“No fucking clue.”

Brooklyn smirks. “So…any monsters or ghosts?”

For a second, my voice fails me. My entire body shivers, and my heart and lungs constrict.

“Oddly—no,” I finally toss out, as sarcastically as I can.

Brooklyn arches a brow. “What was the dare, anyway?”

“She had to take something, leave something, and record herself saying ‘there’s no such thing as monsters’,” Evie blurts out. “In Lady Greymoor’s old *bedroom*,” she adds with a tremble.

Val snickers. "*Wow*, *craaaazy* dare. I'm so sad I missed this rager of a party, Evie."

Evelina rolls her eyes. "Hey, it was *fun*." She frowns. "Well, except for Irina showing up with Alicia." Her lips purse. "And Roman getting *wasted* later on."

I turn to her, my brow furrowing. "He all right?"

She shrugs. "I guess. He didn't black out in the pool like he did that other time. But…jeez. It's like there's no off switch sometimes with him. And I can't babysit him. I mean, he's a grown man."

Val's lips curl up at the corners salaciously and he clears his throat.

"Maybe he just needs another grown man to babysit him."

Evie frowns. "What does that mean?"

Brooklyn sighs, shooting Val a look. "It means he wants to bang your brother."

Eveline turns red again. "Oh my *God*, Brooklyn!" She blurts. "Eww! He does not!"

"No, that's pretty much exactly what I meant," Val grins.

Evelina rolls her eyes. "Roman is *straight*, Val. He has sex with girls."

Val shrugs. "I have sex with girls too. *And* guys. It's called having your cake and eating it too," Val smirks. "I highly recommend it."

"*So*," Brooklyn interjects, pointedly shutting down the other two as we all head to the changing room. "What did you take and what did you leave?"

Nothing. My sanity.

"A book," I lie, shrugging. "And I left a buck."

"What book?" Val asks, following us in.

It's not like he makes a habit of it, but Val often ends up using the women's changing room. It's not a "Val frequently dates men so la-di-da we can all get changed with him because he's safe" thing. It's more that he's like a brother to all of us.

"Is this about you breaking into Greymoor Manor the other night?" Naomi interjects as she pulls a hoodie over shower-wet hair.

"I didn't…" I sigh, rolling my eyes. "Never mind."

"Yeah," Val says, peeling off his t-shirt to reveal his chiseled, inked chest. "She had to leave something and take something for a dare from the one and only Alicia."

Naomi makes a face. "What a cow."

Again, *zero* tears.

"So… You took a book?" Naomi grins. "Bet I know which one."

I shoot her a look.

"What?" she giggles. "Dude, you're predictable. You've looked for that book every single time I've ever been in a bookstore with you."

Brooklyn frowns. "Wait, what book?"

"*The Sorrows of Young Werther*," Naomi says with dramatic fanfare. "By Goethe."

Val arches a brow. "Wasn't Goethe German?"

"Yes, but it's been translated into English," I sigh. "And for the record, I love it because I read it right after my mom died, and it's always felt comforting to me."

I'm about to ask Naomi how her day off was—she and Nico were planning on driving out to Long Island to visit Nico's dad,

Vito. But before I can do so, I'm distracted by the sight of Brooklyn turning away from me to peel off her leotard, revealing some *very* ugly-looking bruises on her ribs.

"*Duuude*—"

I whirl and shoot Val a hard look, shutting him up. He gets the message, and the two of us exchange another worried glance before I shake my head and silently mouth "I'll talk to her."

Evelina ends up leaving with Naomi. I linger, waiting for Val to finish up, while Brooklyn showers.

"Is she still seeing that motherfucker?" he growls quietly as he yanks on a sleeveless sweatshirt.

"I'll talk to her," I say quietly.

"Yeah, you do that," he mutters. "If she says yes, tell me and I'll go snap the little fuck in half."

Bless his heart. Val really is like a protective brother sometimes.

He's gone and I'm dressed when Brooklyn finally steps out of the shower with a towel around her.

"Just you and me shutting down the joint, huh?" she quips as she dries off and starts pulling clothes on.

"Brook…"

She glances at me. "Huh?"

I frown, nodding gently at the bruises on her ribs. I instantly see the clash of emotions on her face, even if she tries to bury them quickly.

"Oh, that…" She lifts a shoulder easily as she quickly does up her bra and yanks on a t-shirt. "Yeah, I was out seeing a band and the crowd got a little wild. This dickhead knocked into me and slammed me against the bar—"

"Did James do this to you?"

"James and I broke up months ago, Milena," she says quietly.

"Brooklyn, c'mon, if he—"

"I'm fine," she smiles, walking over and putting a hand on my arm. "Really. Yes, James was and is an asshole and a piece of shit. No, this isn't from him. I honestly did get pushed into a bar, okay?"

I hesitate, unconvinced.

"Milena," she sighs. "I'm *fine*, I promise. Can we drop this?"

"Promise me again."

She smiles. "I *promise*. Can we go now?"

"Yeah," I smile, hefting my dance bag onto my shoulder. "Let's get out of here."

* * *

BROOKLYN and I end up meeting Lyra for a drink, so it's late by the time I get home.

By home, I mean Papa's home. Yes, I still live here at the age of twenty-two. I tried moving out on my own about a year ago, not even because I *wanted* to, I just felt I was at the age where I *should*.

I ended up hating it, so I moved back here with Papa.

I know it's a cliché, people of my generation still living with their parents. But it's not like we're sharing a two-bedroom apartment. The Kalishnik house—more like a castle—is *huge*.

Bigger than Greymoor, even: six stories of elegance on Central Park West, overlooking the reservoir in the park. Seven bedrooms, *ten* bathrooms, rooftop garden and terrace, indoor pool, underground garage space for twelve cars…even a full

Russian bath and sauna in the basement.

But it's not just the opulence and luxury that made me want to move home.

It's Papa.

We've always been close—I suppose only children are like that with their parents—but after mom died, we got even closer. I mean, it was just the two of us facing some pretty heavy shit. First Mom, then Papa's cancer that almost left me an orphan at seventeen.

I drop my bag in the mudroom just off the front foyer and then pop into the kitchen to say hello to our chef Angelina and our housekeeper Vasilisa. They've both been with us since I was probably nine; at this point, they feel more like aunties than anything else.

Vasilisa, as always, wants to know all the latest gossip from work. Angelina—*also* as always—insists I'm "too skinny" and ends up all but force-feeding me a raspberry cream pastry she's just whipped up.

Which is fucking *delicious,* by the way.

"Oh, and your Papa wanted to see you when you got home. He's up in the throne room."

I grin. Angelina means his office, but they've both been calling it the throne room for about a decade now.

I snag one more pastry, promise to fill Vasilisa in on Val's latest situationship drama-rama later, and head upstairs.

The door is open a crack, which is Marko Kalishnik-speak for "I'm expecting you, and you may come in."

So I do.

"Ahh, my prima ballerina is home."

I grin as I push the door open and enter the massive, elegant room paneled in dark wood and lined with old bookcases. I've always loved the smell of his study. I mean, I *hated* when he smoked, and he hasn't in years, thank God. But the lingering tobacco smell, mixed with leather, old wood, and I guess *power*, always warms my heart a little.

Marko Kalishnik sits behind his desk, shirt crisp, sleeves rolled up. He's in his early fifties, and his hair is silvering at the temples these days. But he's still handsome in a dangerous, old-world way. Papa's always reminded me of a movie star from a previous generation, like a Paul Newman or a Marlon Brando. He hasn't dated at all since Mom passed, but he still turns plenty of heads when we're out.

There's a crystal decanter of vodka on the corner of his desk, and a glass already poured. He drinks *far* less now than he did when I was younger. I'm not saying he was a drunk or anything. But, hello… We *are* Russian, after all.

The vodka on the desk is more Marko-speak, and I know it clearly means: "something fucky is afoot, but Papa is tackling it."

The other obvious clue there is that my uncle Levka is also here, sitting by one of the windows that overlooks Central Park, a glass of vodka in his hand.

"*Privet, dyadya.*" I smile at him as he stands and walks over to me.

Hello, Uncle.

There was a time when Papa was sick—a long time—that Uncle Levka lived here with us. He ran the empire during the worst of it, when Papa was barely able to get out of bed and in heavy treatment for his aggressive cancer, which is thankfully in total remission now.

…He was running things *that* night, actually.

I hug my uncle tightly before he pulls away and grins at me. "And how is my little Anna Pavlova?"

I roll my eyes. Anna Pavlova is probably the most famous Russian ballerina of all time. It's also Uncle Levka's favorite nickname for me.

"Oh, fine," I shrug. Then I glance warily at my father. He's smiling, but there's a look on his face that says the same thing as the vodka sitting on the desk.

Something's up.

"What…" I clear my throat and start again. "Angelina said you wanted to see me?"

His smile falters just a little bit. "Why don't you sit. I'm sure you could use the rest after a day like yours."

I shrug. "I'm fine—"

"*Please sit, Milena*."

My stomach clenches, but I nod and obey. Uncle Levka moves back to his seat by the window. Across from me, my father clears his throat.

"Leo Debolsky is back in New York."

My chest lurches, and there's no stopping the grimace that spreads over my face.

"That's…a thing," I mumble.

Papa's brows lift. "Indeed."

Yeah, it's a thing. A terrible thing. Leo Debolsky is a fucking *pig*.

Trust me: I once spent a weekend with him in the Hamptons.

Not like *that*. It was about four years ago, when Papa was at his sickest, and Levka was running things. The Debolsky Bratva came knocking, and Leo's father Vladimir fielded the idea of his fucker of a son marrying yours truly.

Papa would have never even *considered* marrying me off like that, especially not to a piece of shit like Leo. But Levka… He's a bit more old-school sometimes. And in his defense, our family was going through it back then. No one knew if Papa would actually pull through, but the Bratva High Council, the United Nations-style governing body that holds *a lot* of sway over the Bratva world, was unwilling to vote preemptively on Levka taking Papa's seat at the table.

Under that sort of pressure, I guess I can see now why Levka entertained the idea of me marrying Leo.

So I got shipped off to a "get to know your prospective husband" weekend in the Hamptons. The idea was to wine and dine with Leo, get comfortable with each other, and see if maybe this was something that might happen.

In reality, I spent the entire time *aggressively* fighting off his drunken advances and learning just how negatively the asshole responds to the word "no".

It was so bad that I literally ended up barricading myself in my room with the dresser in front of the door the last night we were out there.

"Why are we talking about Leo Debolsky?" I say quietly.

"His family has expanded their business dealings," Papa replies, his tone cold. "They're operating in Brooklyn, Jersey, and parts of Queens now. And they're looking to secure alliances in the city."

There's a beat before he continues.

"Vladimir has…expressed interest in re-opening discussions."

I scowl. "What *kind* of discussions?"

"The same ones we had four years ago, Milena," my uncle mutters from his chair.

My eyes widen with disbelief and anger as I whirl first to Levka, then my father.

"*What*? Also, isn't Leo is already engaged, last I heard?"

"She recently passed away," Papa says quietly. "Car crash."

I stare at him. "When?"

"About four weeks ago," my uncle murmurs.

My jaw drops as I look at Papa. "And he's already looking for another one?!"

Papa sighs. “The Debolsky bratva is growing exponentially in power. I’ll admit, an alliance would strengthen our position.”

My heartbeat ticks louder. My chest tightens.

“You want me to marry Leo.”

“I’m merely saying it’s an option,” Papa says. “The choice remains yours—”

“You can’t be fucking ser—!”

“*I have no male heir, Milena*!” Papa roars, pounding his fist on the desk between us and making the vodka in his glass splash over the rim a little.

He takes a breath, composing himself as he shakes his head.

“I have no male heir,” he repeats, more calmly. “Even if you *did* want the throne after I’m gone—”

“Which I don’t.”

“I’m *aware* of that, my daughter,” he sighs. “But if you *did*, it would be an uphill battle for a woman to take over the empire, and we both know it.”

He's right.

Papa might be one of my biggest champions, and though he is old-school in some ways, I know without question that if I *did* want to succeed him as the head of the family, he’d move Heaven and Earth to make it happen.

But while there *are* female heads of Bratva families, like Anastasia Javanović or the formidable Yelizaveta Solovyova, aka the White Queen, it’s not common. The Bratva world is still *deeply* rooted in patriarchal, old-fashioned ideas.

“Look, Milena,” Papa continues. “I know he was prick four years ago—”

“He tried to kick in my bedroom door while I was sleeping after I told him I wouldn’t fuck him!” I yell back.

Papa’s face darkens with anger, even though he’s heard this story before.

“Vladimir has spoken to me about his son’s…issues with alcohol,” Levka adds.

“Oh, we’re going to blame his behavior on the fact that he was drunk?” I snap.

My father shakes his head. “You have every right to be angry about what happened four years ago, Milena. You also have every right never to see or speak to Leo Debolsky again. But…”

“But people can *change*,” my uncle grunts. “And your father is right. Neither he nor I is going to live forever. And you have no brothers.” He shakes his head. “This, like it or not, is how our world works, Milena.”

He forces a tight smile to his face.

“Leo’s no angel. But he’s a useful devil. And a manageable one.”

“And I’m just a pawn.”

Papa’s mouth tightens. “You’re not. This would be a powerful bond, I won’t pretend otherwise. But you are still my daughter. And you will *never* be asked to do anything you don’t want to. I promise you that.”

Eventually I say goodnight to them both, then leave the study with my head high.

They say it’s *my choice*.

I’ve lived long enough in this house, though, to know there’s a second part to that statement: *but choose wisely*.

By the time I reach my bedroom, I feel like I’m splintering.

I shut the door behind me, lean against it, and exhale heavily. My reflection stares back at me from the vanity mirror—hair scraped back, collarbones sharp, eyes hollow.

Dancer. Daughter. Pawn.

I used to think ballet was my escape from this world. The one place where no one else got to choreograph my future.

Now I'm not so sure.

Because even there, I'm losing control.

Even there, *he* follows me.

I peel off my clothes and shower quickly before changing into pajamas and crawling into bed. My body aches in all the ways it usually does at the end of a workday, but tonight, there's something deeper there.

Leo Debolsky wants to marry me. I should be thinking about *that*, and how my decision to do so or not could affect the future of my family's empire.

But all I can think about is the masked man who chased me like I was his prey, bent me over the piano and rasped filthy promises into my skin.

Worse, the black, venomous thought that lingers after I replay the whole thing start to finish, to the part where I got away from him.

The little voice that wonders—maybe even wishes—that I *hadn't* gotten away, a dark part deep inside me dying to know what might have come next…

There's something wrong with me. Something rotten and hungry.

I press my thighs together and close my eyes.

I think about the masked man, and about running. I think about the rush and the exhilaration of *almost* touching that part of me I've never explored. The part of me I've only ever shared with one person.

One boy, four years ago.

Someone I told my every black secret to.

…Who then became a monster.

.

Here's a question.

If something feels good, but everyone says it's bad, is it still bad?

I'm not talking about murder or whatever. I mean the other stuff. Wanting things you're not supposed to. Doing shit that makes your blood pump even if it makes someone else flinch.

Who decides what's "good" anyway?

I think most people just pretend to be good because they're too scared to really look in the mirror.

But me? I'd rather know who I really am.

Even if it means admitting I'm not the hero of this story.

Be heard,

-Me

5

NERO

SHE LOOKS beautiful in her sleep.

Not everyone does: some people sprawl out, limbs all over the place, mouth wide open, looking like a cross between a goddamn starfish and a zombie.

Not her.

I slip from behind the window drapery, moving silently across the floor until I'm at the foot of her bed. The bedroom is a mix of elegant chic and girlish princess, complete with a vanity lined with crystal perfume bottles, a walk-in closet overflowing with designer wear, and a four-poster canopy bed that Dracula would love.

I suppose that makes *me* the Count in the current scenario.

I vant to suck your blood…

Hmm. Haven't ruled that out yet.

For now, though, I stand there and watch the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest, her long blonde hair pulled back in its usual high, tight ponytail.

My jaw tightens.

That fucking ponytail makes me *want things*. The same things I wanted the other night, when I watched it bounce and swish in front of me, taunting me as I ran after her. I want to wrap it in my fucking fist and use it to guide that soft, pretty, *pouty* mouth of hers up and down every thick inch of my dick until it's dripping and messy with her spit.

As if on cue, His Majesty rises to immediate attention in my jeans, swelling painfully tight against the denim.

The Kalishnik estate isn't just set on some of the most sought-after real estate in New York, if not the world. It's also *impenetrable*. Armed guards on every floor. Motion sensors. Cameras. A laser-assisted pressure alarm system on the roof. Even goddamn drones sweeping the perimeter in alternating patterns. Taken together, it makes the building *impossible* for most people to get into.

But I'm not most people.

And obsession makes a man…*inventive*.

Still, it wasn't exactly easy, getting in here tonight. And being caught would mean—aside from me almost certainly losing my head, or at least several other appendages—all-out war between the Kalishnik Bratva and the De Luca family. Which would probably spiral into a war between the Italians and the Russians, which would in turn pull in the Greeks, the Irish, the Yakuza—fuck, by that point, probably everybody else too.

In short, mutually assured annihilation and a large-scale bloodbath, all because a blonde ponytail gets my dick hard.

The rational next thought, then…the obvious goal…is *not* to get caught.

The *irrational* next thought, which is the one *I* have, is to *make the most of it*.

I slowly move around the bed until I'm standing next to her pillow, still looking down at her sleeping form, watching her lips twitch in her sleep.

I've always thought of her as just another spoiled, untouchable Bratva princess. It would appear I misjudged Ms. Kalishnik.

The *real* Milena is the woman who ran from me the other night. Not just because I scared the fuck out of her, and she probably felt her life was in danger. That's too easy.

She ran from me like she *wanted* to be caught. Squirmed against me with a heat I haven't stopped thinking about since.

Now, she's laid out in front of me like a question begging for the answer.

I reach for the blanket. Not quickly, not greedily. Slowly, like I'm unwrapping a delicate present. *For me*.

The silk sheet slides away from her collarbone. She's only wearing a thin tank top, and my eyes feast on the way her nipples are pebbled and hard under the fabric.

Yep, those will be for me, too.

I keep going, gradually tugging the sheet off her, pulling a little harder to free it from her sleeping grasp. It slides lower, over her taut stomach, toned from her punishing dancing routine and bare from the tank top riding up. The sheet glides lower, over her hips, until I see pale pink lace panties. The fabric's thin and soft, molded so tight to her pussy that I can make out the cleft of her sweet cunt.

Why, hello there…

She's got one leg bent, opening her up to my hungry gaze. I crouch beside the bed, close enough to feel the warmth of her skin.

Close enough to *inhale* her.

She shifts slightly but doesn't wake. My fingers hover over the curve of her inner thigh, watching her breathe until I can't resist any longer.

I drag a single finger along her seam through her panties.

She exhales softly, breathily, and her legs part a little more.

Good girl.

My heart pounds harder than it did during the kill at Court the other night. My demons thirst for an even more intoxicating vice than blood.

I trace my finger over her again; slower, more firmly.

She's warm.

More than a little wet.

My cock throbs behind my zipper.

My long fingers slide beneath the fabric, skin to skin now. Her pussy is soft and slick, and my knuckles brush the top of her thigh as I part her folds and find the molten wet heat within.

Fuck.

I drag my finger up and down her slit, watching as her brow furrows slightly, her mouth opening to release a silent, sleepy whimper.

Slowly, I bring my finger to my mouth, wrap my lips around it and swipe it with my tongue.

Fucking FUCK.

She tastes sweet, like peaches and sin with a darker undertone of sweat and shame. Like she wants this, even asleep.

I stare down at her.

Still unconscious. Oblivious.

I lean close, my lips at her ear.

"Dreaming of me, princess?" I whisper. "Running from me again?"

Her body answers before her mind ever could.

Her hips shift, a soft sound escapes her throat, and it's my undoing.

I hook my fingers into the waistband of her panties and slowly, silently, pull them down. Her legs twitch when the lace slides over her thighs, but she doesn't wake.

I palm the scrap of lace and slide it into my coat pocket.

She won't be needing that.

Slowly, I swing her hips around, moving them toward the edge of the bed until her long, lean dancer's legs drape over my shoulders. She shifts in her sleep, and I pause long enough to let her sink back into dreamland.

My eyes drag up her inner thighs to home in on her glistening pink lips.

Fuck me, she's got a pretty pussy.

A billboard in Times Square-worthy pussy. The Cindy fucking Crawford of pussies.

It's mine now.

The peachy scent of her invades my senses as I lean closer, making my mouth water and my dick ache in my jeans.

I allow myself to wallow in delayed gratification just a few seconds more, my mouth hovering an inch above her glistening lips and swollen clit, my breath teasing over her skin as her hips roll in her sleep.

Then there's no stopping me.

I drag my tongue over her slowly, tasting every inch as it glides between her lips: one long, deliberate lick from bottom to top.

Fuck.

Me.

She tastes like Heaven and Hell. Like sin and desire. Peaches and fucking cream. And it only takes about half a second before I realize I may already be fucking addicted to her sweet cunt.

I growl quietly and do it again, dragging my tongue up her velvety soft lips, letting the tip of it swirl over her throbbing clit.

Milena shifts in her sleep, and a low, desperate whimper tumbles from her lips.

Don't worry, princess. I'm nowhere near finished.

I grip her thighs and delve deeper, tongue flicking, curling, stroking, pushing into her. Her arousal coats my mouth and drips down my chin as I eagerly devour her.

Her breath catches.

Her hips roll.

Her thighs tremble as she moans quietly, her fingers tightening their grip on the sheets.

I groan against her clit, sucking softly, teasing it with the flat of my tongue as I pull it between my lips.

I have a sudden, desperate need to make her come. To taste her as she floods my tongue. She's getting close. I can tell by the way her legs start to tense and her breath is shuddering in her chest.

I circle her clit with the tip of my tongue again. And again. Pressing harder, pushing her to the brink as her face caves and pleasure tears from her throat.

Suddenly, her whole body arches. She gasps so loudly that for a second I think she's woken up. Her thighs clamp around my ears, and when she moans, I can feel her flooding my tongue and chin with her cum.

Her orgasm rolls through her in a silent wave. No screams or cries, just a trembling exhale, a twitch of her hips, and the peachy sweetness of her pussy coating my mouth as I swallow every drop.

I stay there for a beat, savoring the way she pulses against my mouth as I keep licking her. I tease her clit once more with the tip

of my tongue, relishing the way she squirms and whimpers in her sleep.

I don't want to wake her. Not *this* time.

Tonight is more about leaving a message.

A simple, straightforward one, at that:

You, Milena, are *mine*.

I pull the blanket gently up over her hips. I leave the slick wetness on her thighs.

She stirs, eyes fluttering behind her lids, but still, she sleeps.

I go back to the window, but not to leave, not yet. I'm merely getting the presents I brought her. Back at her bed, looming over her as I look down at her quiet, sleeping, utterly wrecked face, I leave them on the pillow next to her.

Then I brush a strand of blonde from her face, my lips curling darkly.

We've only just begun, little princess…

6

MILENA

I WAKE SLOWLY, the way you do when you've had a good dream and you don't want to leave it behind.

My eyes are still shut, but I can feel the sheets twisted around my legs, my skin slightly damp, like I sweated during the night. My hips ache in that deep, satisfying way that usually comes with—

My eyes snap wide open as my fingers brush between my thighs, and then consciousness slams me fully awake.

Firstly, where the *fuck* is my underwear. Secondly, there's no denying that what I feel dried on my inner thigh right by my bikini line is the remnants of *arousal*.

I sit up quickly. The room spins, my head twisting in a haze of confusion with something dark, wrong, and hot swirling underneath it all at once.

Before I can begin to unpack what the hell is going on, something catches my attention at the edge of my peripheral vision. When I whirl to it, my heart skips.

There's a black rose lying on the pillow next to me: thorns still intact, a single velvet petal beginning to curl at the edges. Underneath it, folded with perfect, eerie precision, are my panties.

Not the ones I'm currently missing. The ones from the night at Greymoor.

Everything goes quiet all at once—so quiet that all I can hear is the thud of my pulse in my ears as I stare at the rose and the panties beneath it.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

I scramble out of bed, nearly tripping over the sheets. My legs feel weak, and I'm painfully aware of the bareness and lingering sensations between my legs, like my body's trying to remember what my mind refuses to believe.

I didn't dream what I thought I did last night.

Maybe I did. Maybe that's all it was: an extremely vivid sex dream. The kind that sinks its claws into you so deeply that you're still thinking about it hours after you wake up.

But dreams don't leave roses on your pillow.

And they sure as *hell* don't return the panties you lost during a chase through a fucking haunted mansion.

My throat tightens.

I stare at the black rose like it might bloom into teeth and bite me.

He was here.

He was in my fucking bedroom while I slept.

I don't remember anything, but something happened—

You orgasmed, that's what happened.

I remember that much, even if ten seconds ago I was still imagining that it was a delicious dream. My body arching into the sheets, heat flooding my skin, my mouth parting with a moan I tried to swallow.

Viciousness ripples through my core, sending a toxic mix of horror and shameful arousal slamming through my system.

He was here.

He touched me.

For a second, another thought erupts in my head, sending my hand back between my legs.

No.

He may have touched me, but he didn't *fuck* me. That much I can tell, even if it's been…well…*forever* since I've felt that sensation.

Years. Literally. Not since *that night*.

But I can tell I didn't have sex while I was unconscious last night, which is both a relief and, horribly, something else.

…At least, to the sick part of me inside.

Although, when I think about the feral madness of the man who chased me through the darkness and promised to "wrap my ponytail around his fist while I choked on his cock"—I mean, *Jesus*—I seriously doubt I would have slept through being fucked by him.

Another wave of shame crashes over me. But then, again, it's followed—God help me—by venomous darkness, twisting low in my belly, burning like a lit match.

I grab the rose and shove it in a drawer. I stuff the panties into my clothes hamper, hoping hiding them will make it less real. I pace the room, running my hands through my hair, shaking off the panic.

No one knows. No one *can* know.

This *thing* that's happening to me... It isn't normal.

I should be terrified.

I *am* terrified.

…Fuck, I'm also wet again.

That terrifies me even more.

I shower until my skin turns pink and scrub until I feel raw. I dress quietly, and by the time I leave the house, I've reapplied my lipstick twice and told myself a thousand times that it didn't happen.

That it was just a dream.

But the truth curls in the back of my throat like smoke.

He was here.

And he left a rose and a darkness inside me to prove it.

* * *

I THROW MYSELF INTO REHEARSAL, thinking punishing my body might erase last night from my memory.

Spoiler: it doesn't.

It doesn't stop me from pushing harder and harder, though.

Pirouette. Nail the landing. Extend, *higher*. Hold.

Again.

Again.

I push past the burn in my legs, the pain in my feet, the tightness in my chest that has nothing to do with dancing and everything to do with what I *woke up to*.

A rose and a memory that won't die.

"Milena!" Madame Kuzmina snaps. "Arms!"

I adjust. She nods, tapping her ringed fingers together in that way that always makes me think of a Roma fortune teller. Then she moves on, finds Val goofing off in the corner of the studio with Jackson and Miguel, and barks at them to get back to work.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. Outwardly, I look normal. In control. Strong.

But I don't *feel* normal.

I feel wrecked, inside and out. Like there's the beginnings of the flu or a cold inside me that's eventually going to bring me down.

During a break, I snag my phone and slump down against the wall of the studio, pushing sweat-dampened hair from my face as I aimlessly scroll Insta. I grin when I see a picture Lyra posted last night that I must have missed: a shot from over the weekend, her and Carmine out at some fancy gala.

Lyra, of course, looks *stunning*, the emerald of her gown contrasting perfectly with her fiery red hair. Carmine looks his usual slightly-psychotic-but-still-a-male-supermodel type of handsome beside her in a tuxedo.

Suddenly, I go still.

Next to Carmine is his younger brother Nico, his arms wrapped around Naomi who's looking amazing in a violet dress. Beside *them* is another face I know all too well.

Nero De Luca.

His hair's a little longer than it used to be. His chest has filled out a bit, his shoulders and arms a little more muscled. His eyes are even sharper and deadlier than they were that night.

A shiver ripples up my spine.

We don't necessarily move in the same social circles, but they intersect here and there. He's friends with Carmine and Nico; I'm friends with Lyra and Naomi. That sort of thing.

Whenever I *am* in the same room as him, however, there's a strange sensation that always pools inside me.

I guess that's to be expected when you're around the person you lost your virginity to.

Or, probably the person you lost your virginity to, and they don't know it.

Not "don't know it" as in "didn't realize it was your first time".

As in, literally don't know it was *you*.

Yeah.

We weren't supposed to know. That was the whole point that night. No names. Hidden identities. Faces covered by masks.

Looking back, all that cloak and dagger bullshit seems so stupid now. At that point, we already knew almost everything there was to know about each other. Every dream. Every dark secret. Every buried fantasy.

That is precisely what brought me to that converted warehouse loft in Brooklyn four years ago: the promise of a night of letting go of inhibitions. Of exploring my dark side.

A night of masks, breathless gasps, and pounding pulses as he fucked me as roughly and as brutally as I craved.

But then it turned into a night of terror, with gunfire. A night that had me fleeing home and rushing up the stairs to find Uncle Levka sitting at my father's desk, as he had been for the last few months while Papa was deep in his treatments.

"*Thank God you're home, Milena. I was so worried about you.*"

I replay the frantic way he jumped up from the desk and raced over to hug me fiercely. Four years later, I still remember *every*

single detail of that night.

The good, and the horrible.

“I need you to stay home, now, da? No need to be scared, moya plemyannitsa.”

“What’s happening, Uncle?”

“War, Milena. We are at war. The De Luca family fired the first shots, and we’ve responded with more hellfire than the bastards ever saw coming.”

His face is grim yet proud as he tells me. I’ve barely heard of the De Luca family. All I know is that they’re Italian, very powerful, and—according to my uncle—have been trying to start something with our family for months.

“Those motherfuckers sent a sniper, Milena. Tonight! To this very house!”

My face goes white.

“Was anyone—"

“Da, Milena,” he growls thinly. “They got some of ours. But Antonio fucked with the wrong Russians,” Levka goes on. “And this war he started will be over soon. He’s already dead,” he grunts with a grimace, “and so is his wife. I just heard that we may have even gotten the crown prince Nero, too.”

Nero. I’ve heard of him. The heir to the De Luca empire. He went to Knightsblood University with my friend Evelina’s older brother Roman and a few other young men I know from the Bratva world: Laz Kislev, Bane Antonov, Mikhail Javanovic.

But besides that, he’s a complete unknown to—

“Da," my uncle snickers. "We caught him with his pants down with some girl out in Brooklyn. A converted artist loft in Bushwick.”

My heart stops beating.

“Some shithole on Decatur Street.”

The world grinds to a halt under my feet. Time freezes in a horrific moment of clarity and pain.

The "shithole on Decatur Street" is where I just came from. A loft where I finally met in person a man I’ve only known through letters for MONTHS. Where I kissed him. Where I asked him to chase me through the dark, pin me to the ground, and fuck away my virginity in a violent clash of pain and pleasure.

...And then, that same masked, unknown man shoved me out the back door and told me to run as the bullets rained through the windows.

The sharp clap of Madame Kuzmina’s ringed hands as she barks a correction to Dove across the rehearsal space yanks me back to the present.

Mostly.

I swallow as I stare blankly at the phone in my hands, the memories of that night of ecstasy and terror, of fantasy and blood trickling through my thoughts.

It was when my uncle said those words that it all clicked horribly into place.

The man behind the letters, the book, the mask—who touched me like I was something cherished and devoured me like I was something cursed—had a name.

Nero De Luca.

The mad emperor.

Or at least, I’m ninety percent sure.

He *didn’t*, in fact, die that night when my uncle’s men filled that loft space with bullets. He buried his parents, took over the throne, and made a name for himself carved out of brutality and carnage.

And I gave him my heart and virginity the night it all came crashing down.

Again, *probably*.

“Wow. Didn’t peg you for a Nero De Luca fangirl.”

Brooklyn’s voice jolts me so hard I almost drop my phone. I fumble to catch and quickly lock it, my face blooming with heat as I glance up at her.

“I wasn’t looking at—”

“Oh, no, you were in fact *staring*. Longingly,” she grins. “*Fawning* over, if you will.”

“Okay, *not* what you think. I just happened to have Insta open when I got caught up thinking about something. Chill.”

“Yeah, thinking about something like *dick*.”

“Wait, who’s thinking about dick?”

I groan. Val—of course—joins in the torment.

“How is it that the second someone is getting teased about sex, you show up?” I mutter at him.

“It’s my superpower,” he shrugs. “Say the word *dick*, and boom—here I am.”

“Milena was ogling Nero De Luca,” Brooklyn says smugly.

I glare at her. “I was *not*—”

“No no, I get it,” Val muses. “Tall, kinda unhinged, super-hot in that ‘I’ll choke you ‘til you come’ way?”

I roll my eyes. “You need help.”

“Hey, *you’re* the one getting wet for Nero De Luca, baby girl,” he tosses back.

I sigh.

Touche.

Val grins as he glances at Brooklyn. “I mean, what does a dude like that even *do* for foreplay? Commit arson? Smash kneecaps?”

“Definitely drown puppies,” Brooklyn nods sagely.

I frown at them. “I take it back: you *both* need professional help. Desperately.” I shake my head. “That’s fucked up. You don’t even *know* him.”

“And you do?” Val teases.

Yes.

At least, I think I do. After that night, my pen pal and I never corresponded again. The book disappeared. The letters stopped.

Have I ever confirmed beyond a shadow of doubt that the man was Nero?

No.

But sometimes, a gut feeling is all you need. And it’s that gut feeling that makes me abruptly go quiet whenever he happens to be in my vicinity, that makes me stare at him, trying to peel back the—admittedly gorgeous—layers, trying to guess if I'm imagining it correctly.

To try to reconcile the fearsome, brutal don of the De Luca mafia with a letter full of deep secrets and hidden desires. To see him in the pages of a centuries-old German book, and in a night of wild abandon, smelling of sweat, blood, and cum.

It’s the same feeling I got another taste of the other night, when Alicia set me up to get chased by whatever psycho was waiting for me—or for her—in Greymoor.

I gulp.

Even if he *did* expect her and got me instead, it looks like I still caught his attention.

Caught it like a *disease*.

I shiver and make a note to talk to Rurik, Papa's head of security, about tightening things *way* the hell up around the house.

"Whatever, I need to get back to work," I mutter, making a move to stand.

Val grabs my hand, lifting me effortlessly to my feet.

"Oh, by the way." Brooklyn turns to me. "You wanna go out on Friday?"

"Like, *out* out?"

She grins. "I was thinking Doomsday?"

Goddammit.

Part of me wants to say I can't make it, but only out of sheer petulance. I mean, she busted me about staring at Nero's photo. But Doomsday, a wild club that's known for drawing both great DJs and *lots* of mafia-types—mainly because it's partly owned by Laz Kislev—is fun as *fuck*.

My dance friends and I only started going a few months ago, after we got dragged there during Lyra's impromptu bachelorette party. But now it's become a favorite for a fun night out.

"You have my attention," I say with dramatically arched brows.

"Do I have it like Nero's Insta page had it?"

"Oh, fuck you."

Brooklyn dissolves into giggles as Madame Kuzmina barks at us to get to work.

7

MILENA

DOOMSDAY ALWAYS SMELLS like danger and sex, with sweetness underneath. Maybe it's the combination of expensive perfume and champagne, or the scent of money and youth.

…Okay, I'm waxing *way* too poetic about a freaking nightclub.

We slip past the velvet rope with barely a glance from the bouncer outside. I'd love to say it's because we're all so cool, and regulars here by now. But it's more that one of the last times we came, Laz happened to be here too with Bane, Mikhail, and a few other Bratva types, and he casually introduced us to the manager and the head of security, saying we were "permanently on the list."

I'm not complaining. Doomsday gets a little wild at times, but it is *seriously* fun.

Another of the bouncers inside nods at us, gesturing for us to follow him to one of the big booths in the VIP area overlooking the dance floor.

Tonight, "us" is me, Brooklyn, Evie and Lyra—which is shocking, because ever since she married Carmine, she barely leaves the enormous Barone mansion on 5th Avenue aside from coming to rehearsals. Also with us tonight is Val, of course, along with Miguel and Jackson from the company, and a super-weird couple—I think their names are Kyle and Kylie?—that Val introduced us to about ten minutes ago outside. I'm starting to think they might *both* be his dates for the evening.

Never change, Val. Never change.

A waitress brings over our drinks, along with a bottle of champagne that is apparently "on the house". After that, we're off to the races.

The beat of the bass vibrates through the floor and up my spine as we sip bubbly and scream at each other over the music.

"Who *are* those two?" Brooklyn yells in my ear, nodding past me to where Val is flashing his most charming—it really *is* charming—grin at Kyle and Kylie, or whatever their names are.

Val really is like a brother to me. To all of us at the Zakharova. But any girl—or guy—in the company who claims to have never once found him attractive is a fucking liar.

The man is *built* from lean muscle, charm, sexual energy and swirling tattoos. It's the same kind of vibe that Prince and Freddie Mercury had, which is why his social calendar is perpetually filled.

"Kyle?" I frown. "I think? And she's Ky-*lie*?"

Brooklyn makes a face.

"I think they're his date."

She frowns. "Which one?"

"Yes."

She smirks, rolling her eyes. "I can't keep up with him."

I giggle. "I don't even try."

Just as we both laugh again, movement in the corner of my eye pulls my attention.

Goddammit.

My smile fades as Alicia saunters toward us from another VIP booth, *also* with a glass of champagne in her hand, eyeing me like a shark who's smelled blood in the water.

"*Milena*…" she says, smiling like poison.

"Oh, fuck, I remember you!" Val says loudly, pulling himself away from Kylie's neck and smiling predatorily at Alicia. "Aren't you that wannabe that couldn't hack it and quit? Or did you get kicked out? I honestly forget."

Alicia shoots him a cold look. "I *resigned*, actually. I had other endeavors that I wished to pursue besides following Kuzmina's orders."

"Couldn't hack it." Val nods wisely. "That's all you had to say."

Her gaze runs over Kyle and Kylie. "Still the company slut, I see."

Val grins and loops his arms over their shoulders. "Guilty as charged, baby."

Alicia rolls her eyes, then drags them back to me.

"Did you have fun the other night?" she says with saccharine sweetness.

My skin prickles.

Maybe.

Yes.

I shrug. "It was just a creepy old house."

"No monsters in the dark?"

Her voice is mocking. I look her dead in the eye.

"Nope."

Her expression flickers with—annoyance? Disappointment?

I mean, Alicia and I have never gotten along. But there's a huge difference between "not being friends" and "sending someone to a dark mansion where you know there's a masked man waiting to chase them and then try to *fuck* them."

That's just psychotic. And again, I'm *not* going to give her the satisfaction.

Alicia flutters her eyelashes, switching gears. "I hear Leo Debolsky's back in the city," she says, a pointed sharpness to her tone.

I shrug. "Is he?"

Her smile hardens. "I also hear he and your father had a *very* productive conversation."

She lets that hang. I just blink mildly at her. "Did you really?"

"Indeed. Irina and I are very close."

Shit. I always forget that Irina Lenkov, Alicia's sidekick, is Leo's cousin. Or second cousin or something like that.

"Who knows," she says, stepping closer, voice lower. "If you're still looking for monsters, maybe you'll get to be Mrs. Debolsky after all."

Before I can respond, a blonde, pink shape comes between us out of nowhere and jabs a stern finger at Alicia.

"Um, *PS*," a slightly red-faced Evie slurs loudly.

I groan and brace myself. I love her to death, but it takes all of half a cosmo to turn Evelina *loose* on the world. And I'm suddenly aware that I haven't been monitoring her alcohol intake like I usually do when we go out.

"You're *not* invited to parties at my house anymore."

I manage to suppress the giggle that threatens to break free. “Sassy Evelina” is like a Pomeranian with bows on its tail trying to take on a prison guard dog.

“Oh *no*,” Alicia sneers. “How will I *ever* survive the disappointment?”

“Hey, Alicia?” Brooklyn scowls. “I think you can fuck off now.”

“I’m just…” Alicia sighs dramatically. “I don't know how I’ll *deal* with never getting to watch Evelina’s drunk ass of a brother make a fool of himself again—”

She gasps as another shape lurches out of nowhere, grabs her roughly by the front of her dress, and dumps a glass of champagne over her head.

The whole booth falls silent and Alicia’s eyes bulge as they stare up at a *furious*-looking Val.

“Consider ‘you can fuck off now’ the polite version. Mine will be considerably less cordial. Walk the *fuck* away, cunt.”

Alicia purses her lips, her face going vermillion. Then, without another word, she yanks herself from Val’s grip, spins and marches away, dripping champagne in her wake.

I glance at Brooklyn. She glances at me. Then we both turn to look at Val as he rolls the tension out of his shoulders and sits down between his dates.

“What?” he shrugs. “That bitch can go fuck herself in the ass with a clawhammer.”

“Hear hear! Clawhammer!” Evelina crows, grinning sloppily before I reach up and delicately pluck a glass of bubbly out of her hand. “Heyyy! I was drinking that!”

“Yeah, you’re done, killer.”

She pouts but accepts it, sitting back down and resting her head on Brooklyn’s shoulder.

After all that, I need a second alone to breathe.

“I’m going to go pee,” I lie as I stand. “Back in a sec.”

“Want me to come?” Brooklyn asks.

I grin at a sleepy-looking Evie.

“Why don’t you watch her. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll come,” Kylie drawls in a voice that quite honestly sounds like she's on drugs.

“No, you won’t,” I smile at her.

Val rolls his eyes, mouthing “be nice” as Kyle and Kylie turn to each other and start making out behind him.

“*Don’t catch anything*,” I mouth back before I turn and head off.

I take the long way around to the restroom, trying to clear the buzzing in my ears and shake off the prickle at the base of my spine that won’t go away.

I don’t know why the thing with Alicia just now threw me off so much. Maybe it’s because it forced me to replay what I’ve been trying to block out all week.

A man chased me through the dark. He caught me, pinned me down, and yanked off my panties.

This is easily eighty-five percent of the fantasies I have deep inside me. But the reality was so much *more*.

More real.

More exciting.

More…everything.

And obviously, it made me think of the one other time I ever did anything like that…

I shake the thoughts away as I turn toward the hallway leading to the restrooms. I walk past a low-lit alcove, ignoring a guy sitting with two girls, snorting a line of who-knows-what off a little mirror.

A security guard is posted halfway down the hall, arms folded over a black dress shirt that strains against his chest.

He steps in front of me when I approach.

“I’m just looking for the ladies room?” I smile.

The security guy shakes his head. “Upstairs restrooms are closed for maintenance,” he says flatly.

I try again. “I'm, uh, with *Laz*?”

Okay, I’m *not*. But he did say we were “permanently on the list,” so…

The guy’s brow furrows, then he nods in acknowledgement.

“Apologies, miss. It’s technically closed tonight, but if you like, there’s a ladies room downstairs in the event space.” He nods to a roped-off staircase. “Go straight to the back. You’ll see the signs.”

I smile. “Why, *thank you*.”

My heels click loudly on the steps as I descend. The music gets muffled as I move away from it, and the air turns a little colder without the swarm of dancing, sweaty bodies.

A few dim sconces flicker on the walls, barely lighting the path.

At the bottom, I reach a huge, empty ballroom, the tables pushed to one side with chairs flipped upside down on top of them.

For a second I hesitate, my nerves prickling.

Everything down here feels *off*. It's too quiet. Too still. Like the building’s holding its breath.

Then I catch sight of the door on the far side marked “ladies”, and I head over.

It’s dark inside, but the flick of a wall switch turns on elegant, trendy Edison bulb lighting. The bathroom is all fluffy white hand towels and brass accents, with a huge, gorgeous filigree mirror above a low, marble counter with an inset sink.

I move to it and let the water run before splashing my face a few times.

My hands are shaking.

Get a fucking grip, girl.

I reach for a towel and start patting my face dry just as the door clicks open behind me. I pull the towel away and start to glance up, expecting to see another girl who’s come down here since the restrooms are closed upstairs.

I never get the chance to raise my eyes all the way. Instantly, a hand fists my hair and slams me against the counter, pressing my cheek to the mirror as pure adrenaline explodes through my system.

The scream lodges in my throat as my breath fogs the glass in front of my face. I thrash, trying to shove back against the rock-hard body holding me. I flail, and fight, and kick—

Then I freeze.

Because the voice that growls in my ear is familiar. It's one I’ve been hearing in my nightmares and my fantasies since the other night.

“We didn’t get to finish, *little princess*.”

When my eyes snap to his, reflected in the mirror, my whole world goes sideways.

Because the man pinning me to the glass…with my hair wrapped in his fist and a savage, feral glint in his haunting green eyes…the man who chased me through Greymoor the other night…

Is Nero De Luca.

8

MILENA

I STAY COMPLETELY, totally, paralyzingly still.

This isn't just the man who chased me through a decaying mansion like a wild beast hunting prey the other night. Not even just the wraith who slipped into my bedroom while I slept, removed my panties, almost *certainly* put his hands on me, and then left sick, twisted reminders of that, and our chase, on my pillow.

It's *him*.

The man I once wrote letters to.

The one I *gave myself* to—naively, fully. Brutally and shatteringly.

And he doesn't know it.

But I do.

Or again, at least I think I do.

I found out when I got home—wrecked, bleeding, still full of his cum—and heard my uncle say that our men had just killed Antonio and Natalia De Luca, and that they'd cornered the heir, Nero, with "some girl", at the place I'd just run from.

In that horrific moment, capping a night of both ecstasy and horror, I learned that the man I'd been talking to through letters and notes, with whom I'd shared my every dark, filthy secret, was the son of my family's enemies.

A week later, I went to the New York Public Library to write one last time and ask him who he was. To see if my suspicion was right, and somehow, I'd lost myself with the mad emperor Nero.

But the book where we always left our letters was gone, and I was left with my best guess and nothing more.

Now, here in the present, my body ignites with a thousand confusing signals, half of them screaming *run*, the other half pleading *don't you dare move*.

My breath catches as he teases his finger, like a lover's touch, or a *claw*, over my neck. His mouth is right at my ear when he speaks.

"I was supposed to meet someone that night," he growls. "I doubt it was *you*."

His hand clamps around my waist, pulling me tighter to him, his rock-hard body pinning me to the marble counter. His fingers dig into my flesh through the dress, and his coiled muscles ripple and pulse against me.

"*She*—" The words choke in my throat as a thousand different emotions and sensations explode through my system, all clamoring for my attention.

"She's upstairs!" I blurt. "Alicia—"

"Oh, I'm not interested in *her* anymore."

His hand slides up into my hair, coiling my ponytail and clenching it in a fist. His lips brush my neck, causing my throat to seize up. My muscles clench and shake. My core flutters.

Horribly, my nipples tighten to throbbing electrified points.

“I've found a *much* more amusing plaything… *Miss Kalishnik.*”

My heart lurches.

“But what I’ve been trying to make sense of over the past few days is how a spoiled Bratva princess manages to stumble into a place like Greymoor to be chased and *fucked* by a monster like *me*.”

There’s a rough, feral tone to his deep voice that…*does* something to me. Not what it *should*. It doesn’t inspire fear, panic, or the blood-chilling feeling that I’m about to be hurt, or worse.

Instead…because I’m apparently deranged… It sends a throb of raw need clawing and snarling through my body, sucking the air from my lungs.

“I—” I swallow the lump in my throat, acutely aware of the tingling sensation bordering on pain as he tightens his grip on my ponytail.

“I’m waiting…”

“I was *tricked*,” I blurt, my eyes finding his in the mirror again. “I…I didn’t know you were there. I didn’t know anything about whatever you and Alicia—”

“I already told you: I don’t give a shit about Alicia. We’re not talking about her. We’re talking about *you*.”

“And *I’m* trying to tell *you*,” I hiss through clenched teeth, “that I—”

I cry out and gasp sharply as he yanks my hair tighter, and then pulls his other hand from my hip, winds up, and sends his palm smacking *hard* against my ass.

A mortifying sound, somewhere between a yelp and a fucking *moan*, escapes my throat before I can stop it.

A low, dark chuckle rumbles against my jugular.

“Let’s try that again, shall we?” he growls. “And let's lose the snippy tone while you're at it…*princess*.”

Heat floods my face—a mix of fury, shame, and something much worse.

“I was tricked into going as part of dumb dare at a party,” I mutter quietly. “I didn’t go there to…to…you know…”

“I *don't* know. Say it.”

I swallow. “To…do *that*.”

He chuckles against my neck again, then takes a slow, leisurely breath.

“You’re not selling it, you know.”

My brow furrows. “Not…selling…?”

“Your aversion to what happened the other night.”

“Excuse me?”

He gives my ponytail another firm tug, sending lightning and fresh need coursing through my body.

“Uh uh uh,” he admonishes in a low, sultry deep voice. “What did I just say about the tiara-wearing princess attitude? Try again.”

I remain silent, my body shivering against the hard muscles of his body.

“You want me to *think* that you’re some tourist who wandered into a world in which she doesn’t belong—”

“I *don’t*,” I blurt.

A growl rumbles in his chest.

“For a tourist, you played the role *very* well.”

I frown. Before I can reply and probably get spanked again, he continues.

"A *tourist* doesn't run like you did."

I shiver again as his body presses harder to me.

He could crush me. Kill me. Fuck me however he wants against this counter.

"I… I was scared," I say quietly. "Terrified. I ran because—"

"Oh, is that what you've told yourself?" he muses. "That it was *fear* making your feet pound the floor and your breath catch in the shadows?"

I swallow.

"Or was the reason you ran so fast the same reason your panties were a fucking drippy, soaking *mess* when I ripped them off your pussy."

Shame roars into my face, turning it blood-red in the mirror as my pulse skips.

Nero chuckles quietly behind me.

"A princess like you isn't used to being spoken to like that, is she?"

My bottom lip retreats between my teeth. Then my entire body jolts, sparks, and writhes when his palm comes slapping against my ass again so hard that I bite down, whimpering as the taste of copper floods my tongue.

I whimper as the heated sensation throbs, needy and demanding, in my core.

The harder he pins me to the counter and the mirror, the tighter he grips my hair, the more he spanks me, the further I sink into this new, all-consuming darkness.

I want more.

The twisted thing inside of me craves it.

My breath catches sharply as he licks a slow stripe up my neck, then scrapes his teeth along the same path, marking me. Heat rushes straight to my thighs.

"You smell like you did that night," he rasps. "All soft and scared…and *sweet*."

I swallow hard. "This is insane. You can't just—"

He chuckles darkly. "Oh princess, darling, you haven't seen insane yet."

His hand slips lower, possessive and hungry. The weight of it is dizzying. *Everything* he does is dizzying.

"You're shaking," he observes.

"And you're deranged," I bite back. It only makes him chuckle as his hand wanders over my ass and grips the flirty hem of my dress.

The part that really terrifies me isn't him.

It's me.

The way I'm melting under him. Again.

The way my mind is screaming, and my body is…betraying me. Aching.

Wanting.

He tugs sharply at my hair, dragging a mortifyingly needy whimper from my throat. He tilts my head, forcing me to meet his eyes in the mirror. His hand starts to drag the back of my dress up, the hem teasing against the back of my thighs…

"I'm seeing someone."

It bursts out of me like a gunshot.

"I have a boyfriend."

Nero stills. His piercing green eyes latch onto mine in the mirror. His jaw clenches with a barely contained violence that chills me.

Then, suddenly, he laughs: a dark, rasping, bark.

“You're lying.”

“I’m not.”

His head tilts to the side, a lock of his dark hair falling across one eye like a scar.

“Did you have this boyfriend the other night at Greymoor?”

I hesitate.

“Yes,” I finally mumble.

His eyes narrow. “So, you’re a cheater.”

My brows furrow deeply. “What? No—”

“*No*?” His hand tugs a little at my ponytail, the other one dropping my dress to slide over my hip and yank my ass back possessively against his body.

“You came to that house looking for…” He chuckles. “Well, I think we *both* know.”

My eyes narrow. “I was *tricked*,” I snap. “I already told—”

I yelp when he spanks my ass again.

He really needs to stop doing that.

Not because it hurts…although it does…but because with every fucking slap, my defenses break down a little more, like a dam crumbling.

Pretty soon, I won’t have any left.

“I didn’t know—”

“Didn’t know *what*?” he growls. “That you'd soak through your panties like a greedy little slut from being chased through the dark by a man in a wolf mask?”

Heat rushes up my neck. “I didn’t—”

“Don’t lie.” His voice dips lower. Turns rougher. “They were a fucking *mess*, Milena. I could still feel the slippery heat from your hungry little pussy when I stroked my hard, fat cock with them later.”

Jesus.

Pure fire rushes into my face as I stare incredulously at him in the mirror.

“You’re *sick*.”

“Ms. Pot, meet Mr. Kettle. And I don’t like cheaters.”

“I’m *not* a cheater!”

“Really?” He brushes my hair back from my shoulder like we’re lovers having a lazy morning in bed. “I thought you had a boyfriend, princess. Or was it *him* you were thinking of as you ran from me with a soaked cunt, just waiting to be used?”

“You’re twisting this…” I breathe, my voice shaking.

“No, sweetheart.” His lips skim my ear. “I’m just pointing out how fucking *shit* a liar you are. I have an even better way to illustrate that point, actually.”

He moves before I can think.

One hand grabs my wrists, twisting them behind my back with cruel ease. The other lifts the hem of my dress, dragging it high

over my ass.

"*Don't*," I croak, even as my core clenches with sick, desperate need. "*Stop*."

Don't. Stop. Don't stop.

He leans in close, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest as his teeth rake the side of my neck again, sending my mind reeling.

"You'll have to be *much* more convincing than that, princess."

I thrash, but his hold only tightens. Suddenly, his hand is on my ass, sliding over the soft skin of one cheek before it quickly plunges between my thighs. A gurgled, choked cry tears from my lips as his thick, strong fingers stroke over my pussy through the soaked lace of my thong.

He *groans*.

Feral. Animal. Primal.

"*Christ*," he growls. "So fucking wet for me. Have you been that desperate for me since the other night, princess?"

I whimper as his fingers slip under the gusset of my panties and yank it aside.

You've been dreaming about it, haven't you."

"No…"

"*Liar*."

His fingers drag between my folds, and my body jolts as I bite back a choked cry.

"You were soaked before I even touched you at Greymoor," he rasps. "And you're soaked now. So which is it, princess—are you a masochist, or a slut?"

"Go to hell."

"Let's go together."

Two fingers slide into me in one hard thrust, knocking the air from my lungs and making my toes curl inside my shoes.

My body tenses and shivers.

My knees wobble.

Oh…*fuck*…

The pleasure hits me like a slap—hot, jarring, immediate.

I hate it. Hate that it feels so good. Hate that I'm dripping for the man who chased me, who broke into my bedroom and touched me in my sleep, who just called me a slut and made it sound like a fucking compliment.

Hate that my hips twitch and arch back toward his hand, wanting more.

There's a sick heat coiling low in my stomach—dark, needy, violent—that doesn't care about right or wrong. It just *wants*.

More.

Deeper.

Harder.

Rougher.

But beneath the want is shame, thick and suffocating, rising in my throat like a scream I can't let out.

I'm disgusting.

Because if he doesn't stop, I'm going to come.

"Mmm, see?" he murmurs with dark smugness. "See how fucking *messy* your little pussy gets for me?"

"It's…" My breath catches, my body shuddering. "It's not *you*—"

He laughs, sharp and mocking.

"It's just biology?"

A needy, achy, pathetic sound gurgles from my throat.

"Just as an FYI, this is *exactly* how drippy and wet your pretty little cunt got the other night, when I visited while you were sleeping."

A stab of something filthy, wrong, indignant and achy slices through me.

"You made such a mess of your sheets when this pussy was wringing the very blood from my fingers. And that's *before* you came all over my tongue and chin."

My eyes bulge, my mouth opening in a silent moan as my body writhes.

My tongue and chin.

He didn't just take my panties off. Didn't just touch me. He went down on me.

While I was totally asleep.

It's *sick* how much that turns me on.

"Ahh, didn't know that, did you?"

I whimper as his fingers suddenly leave my soaking pussy. He raises his hand so I can see in the mirror the low lights catching the glisten on his fingers. My face heats as he spreads the two that were just inside me, letting the sticky cream between them drip down his fingers.

My arousal.

My shame.

My dark, needy ache.

Then, slowly, his green eyes locked on mine, he brings those same fingers to his mouth, sucks them inside, and wraps his lips tight around them.

Sweet fucking Jesus.

Nero makes a show of licking them clean before he slips them from his mouth.

"Every bit as sweet and delicious as the other night, princess. I think you might be going on my permanent menu."

His hand drops between my thighs again, and I cry out when his same two wet fingers plunge back inside me. He curls them deep, stroking my g-spot, making my thighs shake and my toes curl. My arms strain as he keeps my wrists pinned behind me with one hand, and I gasp and moan pathetically. *Eagerly*.

"Tell me you've been dreaming about the other night. Tell me you've touched your little cunt imagining me chasing you again. Pinning you down. Taking what I want as roughly as I please, and not giving *one single fuck* about your consent."

My brain *screams* that this is beyond fucked up, and wrong on so many levels. That this man is a fucking predator, not a dark fantasy.

But the rest of me doesn't get that message, or if it does, it refuses to acknowledge it. My body *craves this*. Reacts to it. Needs it. Demands more.

I can feel how mortifyingly wet I am around his fingers. I can *hear it*, for God's sake—lewd, wet, squelching sounds fill the bathroom as his thick fingers plunge in and out over and over.

"*Tell me*," he snarls.

I hate him.

I hate the way I brace my hips against the sink and push them *into* his hand.

"Say it," he murmurs. "Say you loved it. Say you've touched this pussy and made it come all over your fingers, wishing they were mine or my cock, fucking you, taking you hard, ripping you apart while you scream for more."

I'm sinking. Drowning. Losing myself in his ferocity and mad, mad darkness.

"*No…*"

I gasp when he rubs his thumb over my clit.

"Say it, princess."

I clench my jaw defiantly.

The pressure builds anyway. My thighs tremble anyway. My whole body is hurtling toward the edge—

And then he stops.

He pulls his hand away, like he's suddenly bored of this game. Meanwhile I'm still trembling and aching, *right* on the fucking edge of release.

"*What the fuck*—" I gasp. It comes out breathless and cracked.

Desperate and needy.

Not indignant.

I cringe as shame floods my face.

"You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?" he murmurs in that same smug tone, lording it over me.

He drops his grip on my wrists and steps back away from me.

I whip around, shivering, heart pounding as I yank my dress back down and glare red-faced at him. "You—"

Fuck, I don't even know what I'm accusing him of. Humiliating me? Turning me into someone I don't recognize?

Am I mad that he touched me, or mad that he didn't *finish*?

Maybe it's that I know he's seen inside me, discovered the dark, fucked-up thing I keep locked in the shadows of my psyche. The sick little truth I can never outrun.

He adjusts his shirt cuffs like nothing happened. Like I didn't just fall apart for him. Like I'm not standing here, a mere breath from sobbing or coming.

He lifts his eyes to mine.

"Do you come like that for your *boyfriend*, princess?" he asks, his voice as sharp as glass and steeped in sarcasm.

I gulp.

He watches me like I'm still writhing beneath his touch.

Like this was just *round one*.

I shift, awkwardly trying to slip my panties back into place, pulse still hammering. My skin's flushed, damp with sweat—worse, with *want*. I feel raw, used, unmade.

I should slap him.

Scream.

Instead, I just look at him.

"*What the fuck is wrong with you*?" I whisper.

He grins. Not with humor. Savagely, with teeth.

"So many things, princess. I can't wait for you to discover them all."

He steps close—so close I can feel the warmth of his body like a wall around me. His hand lifts, and I flinch.

But he just tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. Slowly. Gently. Like he didn't just have his fingers against my g-spot two minutes ago.

"Tomorrow night," he says. "Greymoor. Eleven o'clock."

My mouth is dry. "And if I don't come?" I whisper.

"Oh, don't worry, princess. I'll let you come next time."

My face erupts in heat as I glare at him. "I *meant*," I fumble out, "what if I don't *show up*?"

He leans in, his breath stroking my ear, making me tremble.

"I'll fucking find you anyway."

He turns and walks out. Like he didn't just leave me standing in a smoldering pile of psychological carnage.

The restroom door swings shut behind him. I don't move. I *can't*. My thighs are trembling. My panties are soaked. My chest heaves like I just ran a mile.

And the worst part…

I'm still aching for more.

9

NERO

I'M STILL FUCKING BUZZING when I get home.

Still fucking *hard*.

I get rid of my clothes like I'm peeling off my skin the second I walk in. The lights stay off as I drift through the shadows, stepping into my bedroom and moving to the wall of windows overlooking Manhattan.

It's mirrored on the other side…not that I give a shit. Dark inside or not, no one in the streets below would see me naked, my hand wrapped around my steel-hard cock as I lean against the glass.

I plant a hand against the window, staring at the monster staring back at me.

My jaw's set. My eyes are haunted. I look rabid. Deranged.

Hungry.

The instant the memory of her big blue eyes comes back to me, I start to stroke my dick, hand tight around my thickness, the swollen head already leaking precum. I replay the choking, whimpered, desperate sound Milena made when she gasped and writhed for me—when her sweet little cunt wrung my fingers tight as she dripped all over me, seconds away from coming.

I picture her eyes, wide and wild. Her brow caved, her jaw slack. Her legs spread and my fingers deep between them.

That pristine, polished, haughty princess veneer she wears so well shattering as she turned into my eager toy, humping my fingers like a horny cock slut.

I finish with a grunt, my muscles clenched tight. My dick surges and pulses in my hand, my balls drawing up tight as hot white cum sprays in ropes against the glass, like I'm covering the city—*my* city—in my mark.

I suck in a ragged breath of air, giving my cock one final squeeze, letting the last drops of pearly white cum drip onto the floor.

When I'm done—as the aftershocks fade, and my heart slows, and the tension *should* be draining from my spine…

Nothing's changed.

The roaring's still there.

The fucking screaming that lives in my chest, always just under the surface.

I wash my hands, pour a glass of whiskey, and knock it back. Then another. The burn is weak. It doesn't scorch deep enough tonight.

I walk to the window and look out over the city. Somewhere out there, she's still trembling from what I did to her.

But I still feel like *I'm* the one coming apart at the seams.

The surge of raw emotions inside of me is relentless, all-consuming, welling up so fast that I almost slam the empty glass in my hand into the window in front of me, just to feel *something*.

My legs shake as I stagger away from the window, yanking pants and a shirt on again and dropping to a knee next to the bedside table. I punch in the code, open the top drawer and fumble inside for the revolver.

This gun is different from the one—or two—I usually keep on me.

I haven't done this in months. I don't enjoy it.

But right now, I need it.

* * *

It's quiet when I pull up at the side gate of the massive Bronx mansion. The guards there nod me through without a word. So does the one outside the back kitchen door when I park there.

It's been a while, but this is hardly my first time here.

I head upstairs to the back wing of the house, heading down a darkened hallway to the closed office door. I barely rap my knuckles on it, then surge through.

Kir glances up from whatever report he was reading as I storm toward his desk. He doesn't blink at my obviously manic state, just eyes me cautiously as I yank out the revolver and the single bullet and slam them down on his desk.

His dark eyes drop from me to the gun. He still doesn't say a word as he exhales slowly, closing his laptop and taking off his dark-framed glasses.

He rolls his neck, stretching his arms, letting the muscles of his forearms flex against the rolled-up sleeves of his dress shirt.

It's one in the morning, in the comfort of his own home, and the motherfucker is *still* dressed up. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever seen him in anything less formal than a dress shirt, slacks, and a tie. He's the kind of rigid fucker who considers removing his suit jacket "unwinding".

But right now, the atmosphere in the room is in anything but "unwinding" territory. Kir looks at the six-shooter and the bullet next to it, his face grim.

"I thought we were done with this."

I shake my head. My jaw's so tight it aches. "Nope," I growl. "Not tonight."

"Nero—"

"This isn't a social visit," I hiss. "Load the fucking—"

"*No*," he says quietly, shaking his head.

"Do it," I grunt, "or I will. And I won't stop at one."

His nostrils flare, and his eyes drag up to mine. "What triggered this?"

I don't answer. I can't.

"Just load the fucking gun."

"I'm going to say this as plainly as I can, Nero," Kir says gently. "What happened to you, and what happened to that woman, is *not your fucking fault*, if that's what this is about."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Yeah, it's not *those* demons tonight.

It's the worse ones.

Your parents are dead, Nero. It was mercenaries. We have no idea what coward hired them. I'm so sorry…

"Just fucking do it," I croak. "*Please*."

I need this before I unravel completely.

He swears under his breath, clearly hating this. But then he picks up the revolver, his movements clean and efficient as he slips the bullet into one of the six empty chambers, spins it, and racks it shut with a loud click.

My throat works. “Show me,” I say.

He opens the revolver, tilts it just enough to flash the single bullet. Then he snaps it shut again and sets it down on the desk.

“Life is pain,” I murmur. “Sometimes you can’t escape it.”

Kir exhales slowly, shaking his head. “No,” he growls. “Sometimes you can't.”

I pick up the gun and step away from the desk, toward the window. I look out over the vast wooded grounds at the glinting lights of Manhattan.

I feel the world holding its breath with me.

I tighten my grip on the revolver. My pulse is hammering, making my skin ripple like there’s a bomb inside about to rip me open. Everything inside me is wound tight—blood, breath, thought—a prison I can’t escape.

I stare out at the lights, and that’s when the reel starts playing.

My mother’s laugh, echoing down a hallway. The sound of my father pouring his Scotch. The smell of his cologne on my blazer before church.

The blood. The screaming.

The guilt.

I squeeze my eyes tightly closed, my fingers curling around the revolver’s grip.

Through the pain and the ache and the roaring in my head, I think of *Milena*.

Her fucking mouth. The way she gasped into the mirror. The way that for a moment, with her, it was *quiet*.

Briefly, it felt like freedom from my madness.

But that’s a lie, isn’t it? There is no freedom. There’s no fixing what’s broken in me. Only the noise and the chaos.

The anguished wail that never, ever stops.

It’s back right now, louder than ever. A siren in my head. A *whistle*, building to a scream.

I bring the gun up. My hand doesn’t shake as the barrel touches my temple.

Cold metal against warm skin.

Breathe in. Hold. Wait for the final release.

My finger brushes the trigger like a lover.

My arm muscles tense, my jaw clenches, and the lights swim in the darkness of my vision as I squeeze my eyes tightly shut.

Click.

The silence that descends over the room after the snap of the dry-fire—the hammer hitting an empty chamber, and not the single bullet—is deafening.

No gunshot.

Just the sound of my own ragged exhale tearing its way out of my chest.

But just like that, the screaming’s gone. Immediate catharsis from my fucked-up self-therapy.

I hear Kir step forward, and I let him take the gun—still pressed to my temple—from me without a word. I blink out of my spell, turning to watch him open the gun, remove the single bullet, and then drop them both heavily on his desk.

We don’t speak for a long time.

“I know you hate this,” I say quietly.

“I do,” he grunts. “I also understand it.”

I nod, inhaling and exhaling slowly as I glance back at the lights of the city through the window and the trees.

“I found two more of them.”

My spine stiffens and my jaw tenses as I slowly twist my head, my eyes stabbing into his. “*Where*,” I growl.

“I’ll have them by tomorrow night. If you’d like to do the honors—”

“I would.”

He nods. “Okay. I’ll bring them to the usual spot.”

“Before eleven would be best.”

“Sure. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you for tonight,” I say, glancing at him.

He can't meet my gaze. “Life *is* pain, Nero,” Kir says quietly, running a hand over his jaw. “But it can more than that as well, if you allow it to be.”

I nod as I pick up and pocket the gun, then turn to go. “See you tomorrow night.”

“Until then.”

.

There's a difference between justice and revenge. People say there isn't, but they're wrong. Justice is just revenge with rules. Revenge is simply justice without the arbitrary guardrails society seems to think it needs.

Personally, I think there are people who've 100% earned their endings, and then some. I don't know if I believe in karma. But I believe in making sure people feel what they've made others feel.

That's probably fucked up.

But then again, so am I.

Be heard,

-Me

10

MILENA

I'M EARLY.

Which is…horrifying.

Of all the ways I expected tonight to play out, showing up to this early—whatever *this* is—wasn't part of the plan.

I glance up at the front of Greymoor Manor from across the quiet, tree-lined Manhattan street.

How *did* I expect tonight to go? Why am I even here? The easy answer would be to say because he threatened me.

I'll fucking find you anyway.

But that's a flimsy, shitty excuse.

I'm a fucking *Kalishnik*. I have multiple bodyguards and live in a house with tighter security than most royal palaces.

…Granted, that means fuck-all in this debate, considering Nero already slipped into my house to do *anything he wanted* to me while I slept.

A low, achy throb tightens in my core. I chase it away.

If I was really worried about Nero "coming after me" or "finding me", I could request a twenty-four-hour armed guard, or tell my father about Nero's little visit. That would result in a top-to-bottom overhaul of our entire security system, probably our whole organization, by the next day.

But I haven't told Papa.

I haven't told anyone. And not because I'm *scared* of Nero.

Maybe because I'm scared of how easily he slips through my defenses. Not Papa's guards and security systems, but my *own* mental defenses and walls.

Which brings me back to my original question: why the *hell* am I back here for this thing with Nero, at the demand of a man who chased me through this house in the dark, broke into my room, put his hands and *mouth* on me, and then did it again last night in the ladies' room at Doomsday?

Because you want to be.

It's a sick truth: I'm here because a dark, fucked-up part of me is *curious*.

The other night, he invited me to look over an edge I've stayed away from for *years*. The first problem is that I did.

The second one is that *I liked what I saw*.

I shiver and wrap my arms around myself.

The night air is colder than usual for this time of year, but perhaps it's just me. My body's running hot, my skin electrified. Every nerve feels lit up, buzzing. *Waiting*.

Nero *will* think I'm here because of his threats. He'll think I'm scared…and maybe I am, a little. But it's not just the allure of him letting me taste that dark fantasy.

It's that *I know how well he can give me* that taste.

Because he did so once before, when he gave me a private, guided tour of the sort of darkness I'd only fantasized about. A glimpse of sweet madness.

I'm almost *certain* that he's the one I used to write to. The boy behind the letters who told me his nightmares and asked about mine. Who confessed the worst parts of himself—dark, dangerous, things no one else would understand. *Trusted* me with them.

It wasn't just the rush of talking to a stranger about my sick fantasies and having him tell me they *weren't* sick, that I wasn't alone in having them. I didn't just crave the darkness he could pull from me.

I craved *him*—at least, the version of him I used to know. I craved the way he made me feel seen.

Was it love? Or was I just young and stupid and lonely enough to fall for a voice on a page? I don't know. It's a question I've asked myself for four years.

I don't even know if I *want* to know at this point. Because that was four years ago, and I'm so different from that young, naive girl that I don't even know if she'd recognize the me I've become.

And him? If that *was* Nero I wrote to and then gave myself to four years ago, who the *hell* is the man he's become?

The Nero I knew—again, if it *was* Nero—was sharp, with a darkness you couldn't ignore. A thoughtful kind of darkness, though. Quiet. Haunted in a way that made you want to get closer instead of…well…run.

Nero De Luca today is cold, and brutal, and untouchable. He leads his empire with ice in his veins and blood on his hands.

That's the Nero I see in the papers and hear about in whispers.

I exhale slowly. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I've *been* wrong for years. Maybe it wasn't him at all.

Which brings me, yet *again*, to the question at hand: why the *fuck* am I here?

I swallow it back as I cross the street, slip through the gate at the sidewalk, and slowly make my way up the walkway to the imposing front steps. I start to climb them, wondering how exactly one announces themselves at something like this.

Do I ring the bell? Knock? Let myself in like last time, so we can get right to it?

It.

Hot, mortifying need tightens around my middle as my thighs clench. I don't have to dive into any cliches about "wondering what's in store for me".

I know *exactly* what's waiting for me behind that front door.

A monster I'm eager for.

A darkness I crave.

A type of brutal violence that makes my nerves tingle and my core turn molten.

I should turn around, take a cab home, and scrub this whole thing from my life. Go take a bath. Better yet, go to therapy.

Instead, I hover.

Waiting, like I need *one* more second to gather my courage before I step inside.

A breeze rustles through the trees behind me. I close my eyes for half a second. And that's when I hear the voice coming from around the side of the house.

"Really pushing it on fucking time. I told you before 11 was best."

I stiffen.

That's Nero.

I turn and leave the path to the front steps, moving through the shadows, keeping close to the hedges that ring the mansion as I creep around the side.

He speaks again, but this time, the wind picks up, and I don't catch what he's saying. Just that there's a sharp tone in his voice that pricks my curiosity.

I stop just short of the corner and keep myself pressed into the shadows as I glance around it.

Nero's standing beside an overgrown willow tree in the side yard.

He's not alone.

There's another man, as tall as Nero, with broad shoulders and dark hair, his hands in the pockets of a fashionable black overcoat.

When he turns slightly, my brows arch in surprised recognition.

I guess it's not *that* strange to see Kir Nikolayev talking to Nero. They're both the heads of hugely powerful New York crime organizations. And yet, as far as I know—and, as a Kalishnik, I *do* have my finger on the pulse of these things—the De Luca and Nikolayev families have no formal alliance.

I know Kir two ways. The first is easy: he's Bratva, and he and Papa are at the very least friendly acquaintances that have done plenty of business together.

But I *also* know Kir through the Zakharova Ballet: he's both the heaviest investor in the company itself as well as the owner of its home, the Mercury Theatre.

The dim lights from a neighboring building glint through the swaying branches of the willow tree, casting drifting shadows across Kir's face.

Virtually every dancer in the company has at least a little bit of a crush on the man, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. The women. The gay guys. The straight guys all have man-crushes on him. Even Maggie jokes that her longtime girlfriend has preemptively given her a "hall pass" for Kir, if it ever came to it.

He's seriously *that* hot.

Older, with a sort of gravitas that pulls you in. Dark hair that's only slightly salt and peppered at the temples, dark, piercing eyes, a *razor*-sharp jaw, and a physique that rivals most of the male dancers half his age that I work with daily. I know this because he's, on occasion, been known to use the weight room downstairs at the theater.

Shirtless.

You wouldn't even have to know that he's the head of a *hugely* powerful Bratva empire to feel the power he exudes when he walks into a room.

Brooklyn and Val call it his "big dick energy."

I just think he's the kind of man who built an empire from dirt and blood.

"Out of curiosity…"

My eyes snap from Kir to Nero, and forbidden heat teases down my spine.

Kir might be very good-looking, and obviously radiates power you can *feel* in the air. But Nero?

Nero's another sort of power altogether: darker, edgier, more feral. Kir's handsome; Nero's got a wolfish, primal vibe.

Kir looks like he would pick you up in a limo and take you to dinner at a restaurant he's completely booked out, if not *bought* for the occasion; Nero looks like he would cut your clothes off with a blade, chase you naked through the woods, then fuck you with his hands around your throat until you see God.

…And again, there *might* be something severely wrong with me. Because it's that Nero vibe, hands down, that makes my skin tingle and my pulse run like napalm in my veins. That makes my thighs clench together as needy heat pools in my core.

"Why this?" Nero growls. "I mean instead of the usual, you know, me pointing the Black Court in the right direction and doing it that way?"

Wait. What the hell is the Black Court?

Kir smiles in the gloom. “I think these two might be more…personal for you.”

“This would be a lot easier if you’d drop the smoke and mirrors,” Nero growls.

A low, rumbling chuckle escapes Kir’s throat. “Every tribe needs a ghost story. Every club needs a boogeyman. I can be that for you.”

I watch as Nero rolls his eyes.

“And how *is* your little club,” Kir asks in a low, baritone voice, his tone almost sarcastic or mocking.

“Not that I actually think you give a fuck, but the Black Court is doing just fine.” He smirks. “Don’t worry, I’ve assured that they still think you’re out to get them.”

Kir’s teeth flash in a dark grin, just a for a second.

“Not that you haven't gone out of *your way* to sell it that you don't like the court,” Nero mutters.

Kir shakes his head. "I *don't* like it. I don't like your vigilante outlook. But I've decided that instead of destroying the court, it’s simpler to just use it for my benefit."

"That because of me?" Nero mutters.

“Perhaps a little,” Kir smirks before clearing his throat. “Anyway, I come bearing gifts".

Kir glances down at what looks like two big bags of trash sitting on the ground behind him. He turns, then winds up and kicks one of the bags as hard as he can.

A low, wet grunt comes from inside it, and my heart lurches.

It’s not bags of trash. It’s bags of *people*.

Kir kicks the second bag, and another voice groans in pain.

A dark glint flashes across Nero’s face—so sharp and vicious that I feel it like a blade down my spine, even from here. He squats down, grabs the top of both bags and yanks them open, revealing the two men, bound and on their knees.

I shiver.

They've been *brutalized*: bloodied, swollen faces, bruised eyes halfway shut, blood trickling from myriad bashes, cuts, split lips and broken teeth and noses.

“Jesus. Did you get *bored* on the way here?” Nero mutters under his breath.

“What they did to your family hurt me, too,” Kir growls, his eyes glinting darkly.

Nero just nods, like he knows exactly what that means.

“Who are they?”

Kir grunts as he looks back down at the men. He winds up again and kicks one of them as hard as he can in the side, making the man shriek into what I’m now realizing is a gag. The man's bloodied face twists in pain as he moans and cries.

“These two,” Kir snarls, “were the ones who held your father down and made him *watch*.”

The murderous coldness in Nero’s eyes sends a rippling chill through my body. The way his face instantly shifts from human to *in*human is both terrifying and electrifying. And when he reaches into his jacket and pulls out a straight edge razor that would look right at home in Sweeney Todd's hand, it's paralyzing.

I don’t breathe. I just stare, my eyes wide and my pulse jangling as Nero twirls the blade meditatively in his hand, looking right at the two men. They sob and scream into their gags, but it's too late.

Nero’s already decided their fate.

He drops to his haunches in front of to the two men. He holds the glinting edge of the razor to the first man’s jugular, making the captive squirm and cry out, straining helplessly against the ropes binding him.

“Their names were Antonio and Natalia,” Nero growls. “They were my mother and father. And you fucking *killed them*.”

He quickly yanks the blade across the man’s throat, instantly opening it. Sticky red blood floods out, immediately turning the man’s face white as his life-force gushes down his chest and torso. Then his eyes roll back and he flops forward into the dirt.

My eyes bulge as I clamp a hand tight over my mouth.

Holy fucking shit.

The second man is squealing and screaming, staring at his dead friend on the ground as Nero rises. He moves over one step, then squats again, bringing the blade to the second man’s throat.

“Their names were Antonio and Natalia,” Nero repeats. “They were my mother and father. And you fucking *killed them*.”

The second one starts to scream—through the gag, through the sheer fucking *terror* painted across his face.

I watch with unblinking, terrified eyes as Nero grabs a fistful of the man’s hair, yanks his head back, then slices his throat in one precise motion, like he’s done it a hundred times.

He probably has.

I’m frozen. Every part of me is numb—except my pulse, which is punching behind my chest like it wants to break free.

Kir watches from the side with almost clinical detachment.

Nero wipes the blade on one of the dead men’s shirts, then stands, calmly cracking his knuckles. It doesn’t look like his heart rate has gone up at all.

I press my hand tighter to my mouth, bile rising in the back of my throat.

What the fuck am I doing here.

This was supposed to be a game. Some dark, messed-up chase kink I could dip my toe into and crawl back out of when I was done.

Not this.

Not. At. All.

Kir is saying something to Nero, the two of them talking quietly like Nero *didn’t* just execute two guys in the back yard of a cursed mansion.

I don’t hear what they're saying. I’m too busy staring at Nero’s hands.

The same hands that touched me and made me shake. That pulled me apart like I was something breakable.

Now they’re covered in blood.

I take one step back, then another.

Quietly. Cautiously. Like I’m afraid he’ll smell me if I'm not careful.

My heart’s hammering so loud I swear I can feel it in my *teeth*. My skin’s gone cold, and my legs are shaky.

Nero just folds the blade and slips it back into his coat like this was a routine chore.

For him, maybe it was.

But I can’t do this.

Whatever darkness I thought I was going to be playing with when I showed up here tonight—I wasn’t ready for this man.

Not even close.

I turn and start back the way I came, fast but silent, the way you instinctively move when you’re in the presence of a predator.

I don’t look back. All I want is distance.

By the time I'm scurrying back across the street from Greymoor, my breathing is ragged and my head a jumble of emotions and panicked thoughts.

I don't stop until I'm four blocks away and my lungs are burning.

Then I press my back to a brick wall and slide down, my face buried in my hands.

11

MILENA

Four years ago:

This is a super fucked-up way to lose your virginity.

I've thought that from the second I agreed to meet him in this empty warehouse converted to an artist's loft that smells like old paint and sawdust.

At night, and…*alone*.

But here I am.

My shoes scuff against the hardwood floor as I move through the open space. It's quiet—or would be, if my pulse would only stop pounding in my ears.

It's colder than I thought it would be. I'm dressed in black, as agreed, but despite the clothes I feel *exposed*. Hyperaware of every breath I take as it mists the inside of the plastic mask covering my face.

That was the plan: no identities. We've never had them, so why start now?

Just this meeting in the real world, face-to-face…so to speak. One night to explore everything we've talked about. Every sick fantasy. Every twisted desire. Everything I've told him, despite never telling another *soul* in my entire life.

I don't even know his name. Or his voice.

Just the "voice" that comes out on paper. For almost a year now.

The first time I read *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, I was fifteen.

Mom had just died.

It was only three weeks since the funeral, and nothing made sense yet. I'd gone back to school because that's what you do when the world ends—you pretend it hasn't. You smile and nod when people tell you they're sorry and then go back to your life like you're not drowning.

I remember the whole class groaning when our English teacher assigned the book. Most people didn't make it past chapter one.

I read the whole thing in a single night.

Then I read it again the next day. And again the day after that.

It was messy and emotional and wildly dramatic, filled with yearning and idealism and a crushing, aching sadness that felt like it had been carved out of my own chest. Werther was self-absorbed and ridiculous, but I loved him.

Not because he was admirable. Because he made me realize the ache I'd been carrying didn't have to be my entire world, head, and heart.

I clung to that.

It was the first time I felt understood by something written on a page. Like somewhere, a dead German author from three

hundred years ago had felt what I was feeling and found a way to write it down.

I didn't tell anyone how much it meant to me. It felt too personal.

A couple of years later, I was killing time at the New York Public Library while waiting for rehearsal to start. On a whim, I looked it up in the catalog. Crazily enough, they had a rare edition, one of the oldest English translations—and in circulation, too, which felt insane. What kind of idiot would check that out?

Apparently, one like me.

Scratch that.

Two idiots. The book was already checked out—by someone named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Or rather, my guess was, someone with a nerdy sense of humor who'd put that name on their library card application.

I placed a request to be notified when it was returned, and a few days later, I got an email.

It wasn't until after I brought it home—with my *own* fake-name library card: Fräulein von B, a character from the book—that I found the note tucked inside: hand-written, folded twice, wedged between two pages like a secret.

> *Apologies for hanging onto this. I didn't realize there were other Goethe masochists in the city. You have questionable taste, but I respect it.*

Cocky. Casual. Just irreverent enough to make me roll my eyes.

But it did make me smile.

So much so, that when I returned it three days later, I left my own note in response.

> *Is there anything more insufferable than a literary masochist? Also, you're one to talk—you've taken this book out three times. I checked.*

The next time I took the book out, there was another note.

> *Three times? So what? I like to take my time with Goethe. And they have that dumb fucking 3-day checkout limit because it's an old edition. Fucking lame.*

That's how it started.

We started leaving each other notes tucked between the pages of that rare edition. Sometimes we'd take the book home for a weekend, sometimes we'd sneak our notes into it on the shelf.

A month in he admitted he was a guy, though I'd already guessed.

He was smart. Funny in a dry, mocking way that made me want to reciprocate. A few years older. He never signed his name or told me much of anything that identifiable about himself, but his voice came through as clearly as if we were speaking face-to-face.

He made me laugh. He asked real questions. More—he *listened* to my answers.

After a few months, he suggested we stop checking the book out altogether. Said it'd be safer to hide it somewhere in the stacks.

He chose the location: a shelf in the back corner of the philosophy section, hidden behind a row of dusty encyclopedias. We moved locations a few times.

And that's how we communicated, letter after letter, note after note.

We wrote to each other for a year, staying totally anonymous.

At first, the letters were about literature. Music. Family. Grief. The way the world could make you feel invisible, even when everyone was looking right at you.

But slowly, they…changed. We started telling each other the stuff we couldn't tell anyone else.

The dark stuff.

He confessed he had violent dreams. That sometimes he woke up breathless, *itching* for carnage, and that although it scared him, he couldn't ignore it.

I told him things I still can't believe I shared with anyone. I told him my fantasies about being held down. Chased. Taken against my will.

He never judged me. He said he understood.

The letters got longer. Rawer. More intimate. At one point, we even made a plan to meet. I suggested the time and place. But then I panicked.

I told him my family was…complicated. Powerful. Dangerous. That they wouldn't understand, and that they might hurt him if they found out.

He told me his family was dangerous, too.

I didn't think he understood. Eventually I outright said that my family was mafia.

He didn't flinch.

Mine too, he wrote.

After that, things shifted again.

The letters got sharper. The edges more honest as we careened toward something real and reckless.

He gave me words for things I didn't know how to explain. I gave him every piece of myself I could through pen and paper.

And now, I'm here to give him the rest.

Tonight we're meeting not to have a friendly chat or to see each other's faces. We're meeting *specifically* so that I can live out my fantasy. He's going to show me that dark side. He's going to let me explore it with him.

And I'm going to give *him* my virginity.

My sanity.

My stomach twists, but I'm not afraid. Not of him, or what's coming. If anything, I'm scared of how much I *want* it, and him. Whoever he is.

It's probably stupid. Dramatic. A little pathetic.

Maybe I've confused connection with obsession. Maybe I've built something up in my head that won't exist after this night. But I don't think so.

Either way, it's too late now.

I pull the note from my pocket again. It's folded and refolded, worn at the creases. His last words to me burn into my eyes:

> Come alone. Come ready. There's no turning back. If you run, mean it.

My throat is dry as I tuck it away.

I want the chase. That's the scariest part.

I want the roughness. The hands that don't ask permission. The game that feels like it might not *quite* be one.

I want to give it all away to someone who knows exactly how to take it.

The presence hits me suddenly.

I never hear a door open. I don't hear footsteps. I just sense a shift in the air behind me, like a storm sliding into the room.

Then I turn—and he's *there*.

Tall. I know that, because we've already talked about how *I'm* on the taller side, but he looms a full foot over me.

Dressed in black and masked, like me. He says nothing at first, just watches me, his breath low and steady, waiting to see if I'll bolt.

I don't.

Not *yet*.

He steps closer, and I feel the heat of his body before he even touches me. His fingers graze along my jaw, then slide down under my chin to tilt my face up. His mask, like mine, is plain. No features, just blankness to hide the boy behind it.

"You're sure about this?" he asks.

I shiver, realizing it's the first words I've ever heard him speak. I like his voice.

A lot.

I nod. He pauses before tilting his head to the side slightly.

"I'm only going to ask once."

"I'm sure," I whisper.

His fingers tighten slightly. "Your safe word is *green*."

I nod again. We've talked about safe words.

Then he lets go and slowly backs away into the dark.

I don't move.

For a second, I think that's it. That maybe this was a test, and I've already failed.

Then I hear the scrape of his boots behind me. My pulse skips, and my skin erupts in tingles and shivers.

"If you're waiting to start," he growls from the shadows. "*We already have*."

I hear the flat smack of his shoes against the hardwood floor, and the rough intake of his breath, like he's eager for this.

I turn, and I *run*.

The warehouse is huge, full of overlapping, crawling shadows. I sprint through the dark, lungs burning. The sound of his footsteps follows close behind.

Closer, closer, *so fucking close.*

I don't want to stop. I've never felt this alive.

It's not just fear. It's adrenaline. It's the heat from being wanted in a way that isn't restrained or *polite*.

I dart around a pillar. Then another. I can't see him, but I can feel him, like static crackling over my skin: his breath first, then the whisper of his hand almost catching my sleeve. Then nothing.

Then—*everything*.

He slams into me from behind, and I go down hard—knees scraping against concrete, palms breaking my fall. His weight crashes down on me, one hand fisting my hair, the other clamping down on my hip.

I scream, but not in panic. It's a cathartic release.

He tears at my clothes. My leggings are yanked down, my shirt shoved up. The cold air hits my skin and I don't fight it.

I *don't want to*.

I hear him panting. Hear his zipper lowering, the low growl that rumbles from his throat when he shoves my thighs apart. Feel the hot, *fucking huge*, heavy dick against my ass as he pulls my leggings further down and roughly pushes my legs even wider.

The swollen head sliding down, parting my slick, eager lips.

He thrusts in brutally, viciously, so hard that tears spring to my eyes and the wind is knocked from my lungs. I'm barely aware of what's happening until he's on his tenth thrust.

And I'm *loving. It.*

Loving the way it feels like he's breaking me in half. Like he's tearing me apart and putting me back together with every glorious, rough pound of his big cock.

My cheek is against the floor. My mouth is open. My body is splitting open and falling apart and *giving in* all at once.

Honestly, I thought it would hurt more.

I thought I'd cry.

But after that first ram into me, it doesn't, and I don't.

I *let go.*

In that moment, he's not a stranger.

He's the only person who's ever truly *seen* me.

* * *

"YOU KNOW, I lost a bet with myself tonight."

He hasn't rolled off me yet. What started as me face down on the ground turned into him pulling me onto my hands and knees and railing the absolute *shit* out of me. Then we switched so that I was on my back, with him on top of me, between my thighs, his hand around my throat as he fucked me into oblivion.

Even with a gun to my head, I couldn't tell you how many times I orgasmed over the last hour.

We're still lying like that: his body over mine, my legs around his muscled hips, his hands on either side of my face. Through our masks, I can see his eyes.

Bright, venomous green.

And he's still inside me.

It's only now that we've stopped moving that I realize just how raw I am. The delicious bruises covering my body and the ache between my thighs. The hardwood under me presses into my spine where my shirt's pushed up, and I suddenly feel how bare I still am.

Yet it doesn't bother me at all. Not just because as a dancer I'm pretty used to my own nudity.

It's deeper than that.

I chide myself, shoving the thought into a little corner in the back of my mind.

We never agreed to that. We never talked about *that* at all. *That's* not what this is.

Tonight was about release. Sex, and just sex. He knew I was a virgin. We've spent months talking about kinks and desires and fantasies. And he finally flat out asked me if I wanted to experience mine, which happen to be his, too.

Needless to say, I said yes.

But that's all this is: sex. An exploration of our dark sides. It is *not* anything more, no matter how much intimacy we've built through our letters.

So, while this *feels* like…everything…I refuse to let myself go to that place where I start getting all starry-eyed and emotional about it. Thinking about "the beat of his heart against mine" or anything nauseatingly romance-y like that.

Nope.

Even as I'm thinking that, though, I'm caught off guard by the way his green eyes pierce my blue ones. They're looking *through me*, flaying open what few parts of myself I've never shared with him. In other words…not much.

"So," he smirks. "Still think this was the worst way to lose your virginity?"

I huff. "In the top five, easy. Top five worst, that is."

"Thanks for clarifying."

I giggle under my mask.

"You bit me, by the way."

"Did not."

"Did so. My shoulder," he grunts, glancing down at his muscle, where there are—whoops—teeth marks. "Definitely."

"Well part of it *was* that I was supposed to fight you."

"Yeah, I was expecting a knee to the nuts, not a wolverine gnawing my arm."

"Well," I laugh, "maybe you deserved it."

For a moment, it's weirdly normal. Two strangers, wearing masks, naked and entwined on a warehouse floor, catching their breath after an hour of hardcore consensual non-consent play, like this is just…something people do.

I want to take my mask off. I want to take *his* off, and look at each other without anything between us.

I'm trying to work up the courage, trying to push past the voice that says I'm being an idiot, that I'm letting my friend Evelina's peachy-pink happy-ever-after princess perma-vibe influence me, when the sharp staccato crack of gunfire sprays the side of the building and blows out one of the windows.

I scream, my body clenching in on itself both from the gunshots and the sudden absence of his body as he disentangles himself and rolls away from me.

"Get dressed!" he roars at me, his muscles tight as he reaches for his discarded jacket and yanks a gun out. "*Now*!" he yells.

I scramble, heart jackhammering as I crash back to reality and grab my clothes.

"What's happening?!" I scream.

He pulls on his pants and double-checks the magazine of his gun with practiced hands before ramming it back in.

"Go out the back."

His voice is pure steel, devoid of emotion.

"What the *fuck*!?"

"I *told* you I was mafia!" he barks at me as I pull my shirt over my head.

"So am I!" I blurt. "But this is—"

"Not what you're used to?" He checks the safety on his gun and then cocks it. "Well, welcome to my world."

I shove my hair back from my face, when suddenly, I notice something, and my heart drops.

The pair of Louis Monte Noir diamond earrings, which were a gift from my mother on the last birthday of mine that I had with her.

One's missing.

I start to scrabble on the ground to find it. Then I'm screaming as another window blows, and bullets slam into the wall behind me. I gasp as he suddenly yanks me to my feet and drags me toward the rear of the loft.

"Go out the back. Be quiet, stay low, don't stop."

He shoves me toward the hallway. I whirl just as he's about to let go of me.

"Wait!" I shout. "What about you?!"

The mask makes it impossible to read his expression, but his green eyes stab into me with an intensity that makes me shudder.

"Don't worry about me. Not my first gunfight rodeo."

We stay like that, barely a foot apart, both of us—well, *me*—shaking as fresh gunfire slams against the outside of the building, shattering more windows. Yelling men draw closer.

"I don't know who you *are*," I hiss. "What if—"

His head tips to the side. "Sure you do. And If I die…"

He lifts a shoulder.

"Then I'll haunt the fuck out of you."

12

MILENA

Present:

I'M IN MY ROOM, pretending to read.

Lying to myself that I'm occupied, and *that* is why I've hardly touched my phone since last night.

…Since I ran from Greymoor after seeing…what I saw.

His blade at their throats. The casual, easy way he just *did it*. And the blood.

So much blood.

Part of me has been paralyzed with worry ever since, waiting for the repercussions of me *not* showing up at the house like he ordered me to, his threat of "finding me anyway" rippling through my brain.

I didn't sleep last night, not really. I ended up going downstairs to the main security station and pestered Rurik to play chess with me, saying I had insomnia. On the plus side, Rurik actually *taught me* to play when I was a kid, but I haven't had a game with him in years. So it was great to finally have a rematch.

Unfortunately, the lack of sleep has left me *exhausted* and fueled my paranoia that Nero is lurking behind every door, waiting to grab me. Under my bed. In the shower.

But he's not. I refuse to admit how insanely disappointing that is in a super fucked up way.

My hands still feel clammy. My stomach still churns when I remember the wet sound of the blade cutting through flesh, the way he unblinkingly killed them.

Not to mention all the other bizarre stuff. *Kir* being there, for one. Or whatever they were talking about involving a "Black Court". And what did Kir mean when he said "these two held your father down and made him watch"?

Whatever. I'm trying not to think about it. Trying not to think about *him*.

A knock on my bedroom door sends my heart into my throat.

"Milena?"

I exhale in a rush.

Not Nero.

As if he'd knock.

"Yeah, come on in!"

I smile back at Vasilisa as best I can when she steps inside.

"Your father would like you in the study," she says with a slightly apologetic twist of her lips.

I frown. "Now?"

She smiles weakly. “He has…a guest. I think he would like you to meet him.”

When she turns to leave, I jump out of bed to stop her. “Wait, who?”

She sighs, looking away before the glances back at me with a wary expression. “It's Mr. Debolsky, Milena.”

My whole face sours instantly, a cold sensation curdling in my chest.

“*Oh*,” I murmur, feeling numb.

Vasilisa shoots me a look. “He did…refuse a vodka when he came in?” she says slightly hopefully. “He mentioned that he doesn’t drink anymore.”

“Hip hip hoo-fucking-ray,” I grumble, putting a hoodie over my t-shirt and leggings.

Vasilisa clears her throat. “I think your father would like it if you dressed—”

“Not happening. Not for that fucker,” I mutter.

Her eyebrow quirks up.

“I mean Leo,” I add with a grin, “not Papa.” I sigh. “I’ll be right down.”

“*Da,* I’ll go tell him,” she says with a soft smile.

I wait a full ten minutes before I go down to the study. The doors to Papa’s throne room are open, and when I step in, a dark cloud settles over me.

Fuck.

Leo Debolsky is sitting in one of the leather chairs across from the fireplace, legs crossed, a glass of what looks like Coke in his hand.

He sets his glass down when he sees me and stands, grinning widely like we’re old friends.

“You’ve grown up,” he says, eyes drifting over me in a way that makes my stomach knot. “Or maybe I didn't look closely enough before.”

I don't respond. I keep my eyes on Papa, who stands stone-faced behind his desk. Levka is there too, leaning against the bookcase like he’s settling in for a show.

“Leo was just saying,” Levka cuts in smoothly, “that he thought it was time we revisited the discussion we paused a few years ago.”

My heart drops.

“I don’t think it was so much a pause as it was a *not interested*,” I snap. Loudly.

The room goes quiet, and I suddenly realize that what I said *might* have been better spoken *inside* my head. Raging dick-bag that he is, Leo *is* the son of another Bratva family, and graciousness is expected to be extended to others in our world, especially when they’re powerful.

Oopsie.

When I glance at Papa, relief washes over me. He’s grinning widely, his eyes twinkling as they land on me. He gives me a slight raise of a brow and a deft nod.

Leo just chuckles at my strong response. “I can understand that, Milena. I was…” He sighs and shakes his head. “*Less of a gentleman than I was raised to be*, the last time we saw each other.”

“Oh, is that what we’re calling it?” I mutter.

“I was an asshole,” he says plainly with a shrug. He turns to my father and lets his head hang a little. “I apologize for that, both to Milena and to you, sir,” he continues. “Profusely. It’s no excuse, but as I mentioned earlier, I don’t drink anymore. Despite my Russian blood, alcohol and I don’t play well together.”

“If only there’d been signs,” I mutter through an icy smile.

"*Milena*," Papa finally interjects, arching his brow a bit more sternly. Then he pulls his gaze to Leo. "I appreciate a man who can admit his mistakes. And I'm sure my daughter appreciates the apology. However, I must tell you that Milena is not, and never will be, a bargaining chip for my business or my empire."

Leo nods sagely. "Of course, of course *Godpodin* Kalishnik."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at his overly formal "Mr. Kalishnik." Alcohol or no alcohol, Leo is clearly still a schmoozy fucking douchebag.

"If I may say, our families are both doing great things right now. You, of course, have the empire you've built with your bare hands. You sit on the Bratva High Council. The name *Kalishnik* commands respect in every corner of our world." He dips his chin again toward Papa.

Ass-kisser.

"…And as you may have heard, my own father has been hard at work the last few years, building the Debolsky name into greatness."

Papa nods. "Vladimir has indeed been doing well recently."

Leo grins, spreading his arms wide. "So. Two established bloodlines. Two strong empires. And Milena?" He turns to me, and my stomach churns as he steps closer. He takes my hand, and I resist the urge to either dry heave or yank it away.

Maybe both, followed by a kick in the nuts.

"Well…" Leo smiles warmly at me. "Families and empires aside, I would very much like to get to know you," he says quietly. "For real. Without my horrible manners."

He winks at me. I smile like I've just bitten into a lemon.

"I think we could be good together," he continues. "We both know how this world works. An alliance between our fam—"

"Is that what this is?" I cut him off. "An alliance?"

"Milena…" It's my uncle who steps in this time, raising his hands to calm me down. "It's…a smart proposition. One worth at least listening to. If our family and Vladimir's were to join, you'd be part of something that would command the respect of the entire Bratva world."

I frown at him before turning to my father. "Papa—"

"There *has* been tension," Levka adds casually, "among the Italians. Word is that the De Lucas and the Barones aren't as tight as they once were. Now *would* be an opportune time to join our empire to another—"

"Whatever rumor you've heard regarding the Barone and De Luca families, dear brother," my father interjects smoothly, "is complete and utter bullshit. Lies spread by those who would see us rush recklessly into decisions that greatly affect my beloved daughter's *life*."

"*Moy brat*—"

"*Nyet*, Levka," Papa snaps with more iron in his voice that I've heard him use with my uncle in a long, long time. "With all due respect, Mr. Debolsky," he growls, turning to Leo, "we're done speaking about this right now. As I already said, my daughter is not a bargaining chip."

"Of course not, sir," Leo replies swiftly. "She'd be my equal. My partner…"

My stomach turns.

"If she's not interested," Papa says coldly, "then that's the end of it."

Leo lifts both palms in mock surrender. "Of course, Marko. I merely wanted to stop by to offer my apologies for my past behavior. And also…well, just to see if your lovely daughter felt like giving a guy like me a second chance."

Spoiler: she doesn't.

He smiles at Papa and Levka. "Again, I'm just here for a conversation."

“Noted, Leo,” my father says with a stiff smile. “But I think we can consider this one at an end.”

“Of course, sir.”

Leo is *all* smiles as he walks over and shakes my uncle’s hand, then my father’s.

Then he turns to me and walks over. Before I can react, he takes my hand in both of his.

“I fucked up four years ago, Milena,” he murmurs, looking right into my eyes. “If you could ever find it in your heart to give me a chance to show you the man I really am, I would love the opportunity.”

Then he lifts my hand and *kisses the back of it*, sending a curdling sensation through me.

I yank my hand back as Uncle Levka walks over and claps Leo on the back like they’ve just sealed a fucking deal.

“I’ll walk you out.”

I wait until the study door closes behind them before turning to Papa.

“You’re *not* going to let that happen,” I fume. “*Right*?”

Papa smiles in amusement, shaking his head.

“Of course not.”

“Good. He’s a douchebag.”

Papa chuckles. “Well, he may have been. But I checked, and he *has* quit drinking.” He shrugs. “You never know. It does seem like Leo’s turned a corner.”

“Great. He can keep walking past mine.”

Papa laughs, slinging an arm around my shoulders to pull me into a side-hug.

“As if there’s any man alive who could ever hope to tame my warrior daughter.”

I smile, but inside, I’m not. Because there might actually *be* a man like that out there.

Watching. Waiting.

And I just called his bluff.

.

Have you ever held on to something, and not said anything, because you were worried about the fallout? Even though just saying it would 100% lift that weight off your chest?

Buckle up, because I think you know where this one is going.

I want to come clean about something. I know I've mentioned that my family is powerful, and dangerous. But I don't mean dangerous like "don't let Aunt Mildred get into the wine before noon" and I don't mean powerful as in "dad is friends with the local police chief".

I mean legitimately, lethally dangerous, and powerful on a global scale.

(This is me taking a deep breath...)

My family is mafia. Not a small-time one, either. The kind that you don't even know exist unless it's on the front page of the New York Times.

I hope that sound I hear isn't the echo of your footsteps running the fuck away...

But if it is, I get it. Most people don't really know what to do with that kind of information.

Remember that joke you made about sneaking in through my bedroom window to hang out when you just thought my father was "strict"?

Bet you're rethinking that one.

Totally fair.

I just didn't want to keep sidestepping it. You've been honest with me, and I didn't want to build this whole thing on half-truths.

Besides, you've always struck me as someone who doesn't scare easy.

So... still there?

-Me

13

NERO

THE SOFT IN and out of her breathing fills the quiet darkness of the room.

I stand in the shadows, watching her chest rise and fall. The sheets are half-kicked off, her legs tangled in them like she fought sleep before surrendering to it.

This is her pattern. She goes to bed like a little princess: brushes and flosses her teeth, does her nightly skin routine, brushes out her long, platinum blonde hair, gets under the covers and pulls them up to her collarbone, folds them back precisely straight. She falls asleep on her back, lips closed gently, hands clasped over her sternum like fucking Snow White after a bite of that shitty apple.

Three minutes later, once she's asleep, that whole perfection routine goes to shit.

She twists. She turns. She kicks at the covers. Her limbs flail all over the place, and her mouth drops open.

I've come to enjoy the path from perfection to ruin that she takes every night as sleep drags her under.

I've certainly watched it enough by now.

Tonight, though, I'm not inclined just to watch. Not after she stood me up. After she defied me.

I step forward, slowly and silently, until I'm standing at the edge of her bed.

She's on her back with the covers mostly off, one arm tucked under her head, the other resting on her stomach. As always, her tank top's ridden up enough to show a strip of bare skin, and her shorts are bunched at her hips.

My fingers ghost over her cheek, then drift lower to her collarbone.

She doesn't stir.

I trace the back of a finger down her side, brushing just enough against the side swell of her breast to make my cock stir. Then I bring my finger down to her ribs.

The air in the room shifts. Pulsing hunger ignites inside of me.

I hook a finger under the hem of her tank top and slowly lift it, dragging it higher up her ribcage. When I get it all the way to her breasts I use a second hand to lift it away from her body and ease it over the soft, creamy swell of her tits.

Her pale, almost ghostly pink nipples tighten as I expose them to the cool air. My cock twitches in response, already thick and swollen.

When I swirl a fingertip over one nipple, it hardens even more, pebbling against my touch, a soft sigh falling from her sleeping lips.

I groan in response, reaching down to cup my bulging erection in my pants.

I tease the other nipple, watching it harden like the first. My palm teases over her taut dancer's stomach, relishing the way it caves under my touch.

My fingers slip into the waist of her shorts. I pull them a few inches lower, just enough to see her hipbones, the line of her stomach, the smooth expanse of skin.

She still doesn't wake.

I pull them down further, taking her plain black panties with them. They slip off her hips and down her thighs until they slowly peel away from her pussy.

Pink. Delicate. Shaved bare.

Swollen, with a little bit of a glisten between her lips as her legs shift softly.

I grin hungrily.

Tell me what you're dreaming about, princess…

The sound of my zipper is loud in the quiet room as I ease it down and reach inside. I take my cock in my hand and pull it out, stroking it thicker and harder, making it pulse and lengthen in my hand.

My eyes sweep over her as I start to stroke with fuller, tighter jerks of my hand. My eyes stay locked on her body: the way her lips part slightly in her sleep. The way her brow twitches like she's dreaming.

About me? Or not?

I'll have to make sure it's the former. *Always*.

I roll one of her nipples between my thumb and forefinger—not enough to wake her, just enough to bring a soft whimper to her sleeping lips. Her chest rises, back arching against my hand as I bring the soft pink bud to a stiff point.

My hand drifts back down between her thighs. I stroke a finger over her lips, my dick twitching as I feel the dewy wetness there. The heat. The *need*.

I find her swollen clit and start to roll it gently in soft, slow circles. Milena's brow caves slightly in pleasure, her mouth falling open a bit more. She moans softly, her body shifting and her hips rising a little.

My hand jerks my cock harder, my blood roaring in my veins as I let my eyes feast on her bare skin. My fingers roll her clit faster and faster. The wet sound of her eager little cunt fills the room. Precum beads on the thick, swollen head of my dick, and it drips down to splatter across her stomach.

Her hips move faster. Her breath catches and quickens. Her thighs clench and her stomach tightens as her greedy little pussy coats my fingers in her slick arousal.

"*Yes…*"

When she breaks, it's like a wave cresting as her body arcs slightly off the bed, her breath catching and her swollen clit pulsing against my fingers as she shatters for me.

I'm right behind her.

I come with a slow, controlled exhale, spilling thick ropes of my white, sticky cum across her lower stomach. I groan, painting her flushed, swollen pussy with more of it, and then for good measure I aim higher, spilling it across her tits, watching the pearly white wetness trickle down over her pale pink nipples.

When I'm done, she's a fucking mess, splattered with thick ropes of cum, from her tits down to her throbbing, pink pussy.

Messy and *deliberate*.

Perfection.

I let my breath quiet before I reach for her tank and tug it down. I pull her shorts and panties back into place, relishing the way my cum soaks through them.

She'll know I was here.

Good.

* * *

By the time I get home, the sky's starting to shift from pure black to the slight blue it bleeds into before dawn.

“Home” these days is actually *home*: as in, the one I grew up in on West 72nd and Central Park West—a towering building that's a mix of gothic and mid-century modern next to the infamous Dakota Building, where John Lennon was shot.

I loved this house growing up. Loved that I could look out my bedroom window and gaze into Central Park. Loved being able to walk across the street to Strawberry Fields, the Central Park memorial to Lennon, and to the one next to it memorializing Iggy Watts from Velvet Guillotine.

I loved the joy in this house: my mother playing piano beautifully, my father singing terribly, my sister and I grinning from ear to ear as they serenaded us.

It was a happy home. It’s probably the only reason I survived what happened when I was thirteen. But these days, home is less a home and more a mausoleum. I still have warm memories of the place, but they’re mixed with the ache that comes with them. It’s become a crossroads where memories dance with ghosts.

After our parents were killed, and I was thrust from prince to king, I moved Gabriella and I out of this place and into a modern penthouse further downtown. She was about to start Knightsblood University anyway.

But a year ago, I moved back, mostly at the urging of Aldo, who thought it would be good for the empire if my seat of power was the same as my father’s.

He’s probably right. He usually is. Dominic is my *consigliere*, but Aldo was my father's for decades, as well as his close friend. He will forever hold a place of immeasurable importance in this family, plus his intuition is *flawless*.

Just the same, a year in, I still don’t know how I feel about being back here. Gabriella has her own place in Soho—of *course*—which means it’s just me in this eighteen-thousand-square-foot memorial to a happier time.

Me and the ghosts, that is.

I walk in through the underground garage entrance, peeling off my jacket. Dom is waiting near the stairs like a silent watchdog, an unlit cigarette between his lips.

He doesn’t say anything at first, just lifts a brow when he sees me, a slightly amused expression on his face.

“You’re up early,” I mutter.

“You’re up *late*,” he fires back. Then his lips curl. “What’s her name?”

“Noneya.”

He frowns as he follows me through the house toward the kitchen.

“What the fuck is *that*?” He shoves his fingers through his thick dark hair and tucks the cigarette behind his ear. He runs a hand over his stubbled jawline, puzzled. “Greek? What’s her last name?”

“Business.”

I grin at him.

“Noneya Business,” he grunts. “Hilarious.”

“You asked.”

“I’m *supposed* to ask where you were when you get home at four in the fucking morning. It’s literally my job,” Dom scowls as I snag a glass and fill it with water.

“Pretty sure your job is to advise me,” I shrug, gulping the water down like I’ve spent ten years in the desert.

Apparently, watching Milena while she sleeps, running my hands over her body, and bringing her to orgasm before splashing her skin with my cum is dehydrating work. Who knew.

“Okay, then I’m *advising you*,” he mutters, “to keep me informed when you’re going to be out late under mysterious and non-communicative circumstances.”

I arch a brow. “What?”

“Non-communicative. Your fucking phone was off.”

I pull it out of my pocket and shrug. “Look at that. So it was.”

Wouldn’t exactly want my phone to start blowing up while I was rubbing Milena’s clit as she slept.

I glance back at Dom. “Still, I’m out late pretty frequently.”

“More than usual, recently.”

I stare at him. “I’m sorry, are you my *consigliere* or my babysitter?”

Dom grins. “Nero, I think we both know there’s a *wildly* blurred line between those. And I’m both, for the record.”

I snicker, rolling my eyes and refilling my glass.

Dom’s been a friend ever since we were kids. He’s only a few years older than me, but I swear it sometimes feels like a decade.

And yes, he frequently does act like my babysitter.

…Honestly, he frequently *needs to*.

Sharp jaw, slicked-back hair, tattoos, permanently suspicious blue eyes. If I’m the wolf, Dom’s the knife hidden in my sheepskin jacket.

“Well, to play *consigliere* for a sec,” he grunts, “Leo Debolsky wants a meeting.”

I pause, the glass halfway to my mouth. “With me?”

“And Gabriella.”

That elicits a bored laugh from me. “Of course he does.”

Leo was at Knightsblood at the same time as me. Same time as Carmine and Nico, too, as well as Roman, Mikhail, Bane, and Laz—although the four Russians went out of their way to avoid even being *seen* with Leo, despite their mutual backgrounds and the fact that their fathers did business together at some point.

Mostly because Leo was, and I would assume still *is*, a fucking *douchebag*. I’ve heard through the grapevine that he doesn’t drink anymore, though. That’s gotta be *some* kind of improvement.

But if he’s requested that my sister be there for the meeting too, it tells me Leo hasn’t found any sense of subtlety in his sobriety.

“This should be amusing,” I smirk, glancing at Dom. “What’s Gabby got tomorrow, schedule-wise?”

He shakes his head, scowling. “I honestly have no idea.”

I peer at him. “It’s part of your job to know.”

He folds his arms. “Yes, it is. And it would be a lot easier to *do* that job if she didn’t make a habit of ditching her security detail every other night.”

Fair. And accurate.

I set the glass down. “Make sure she’s here. I can guess what the fuck Leo wants.”

“Would that be something we don’t want to give him?” Dom mutters.

“Depends on how annoyed with her I am.”

He looks up sharply. “Wait—*Gabriella*? That’s what he’s after?”

“I mean, no offense to my sister, but why would he want her at the meeting too unless it was a marriage thing?”

Dom’s face darkens. “Leo Debolsky is—”

“A bag of dicks. I’m aware.”

“And Gabriella is your sister.”

“Also aware,” I sigh. “She’s a massive pain in the ass, too. If nothing else…” I shrug and grin at him. “It’d be leverage to get her to stop acting like a spoiled fucking brat all the time.”

Dom chuckles and shakes his head. “That should go over well,” he says dryly.

Just then, the front door to the house slams shut, and a few seconds later, Hurricane Gabriella makes landfall in the kitchen.

My sister and I are a lot alike. Same dark hair, same green eyes.

Honestly, same temperament.

Tonight, she blows in wearing a black leather jacket over what I guess some people might call a dress—tiny, sparkly, and very Gabriella. Her Louboutins click on the tile as she steps in, her hair half-falling out of its elaborate up-do and a sly, alcohol-fueled smirk on her painted red lips.

She looks like trouble incarnate.

“Oh, did you boys wait up for me?” she drawls.

She peels off her coat and tosses it over the back of a stool like it’s someone else’s problem. Then she opens the fridge, grabs a bottle of water, and downs half of it at once.

“Good morning, Gabby,” I drawl. “Please, come right in. Make yourself at home.”

She turns to shoot me a look. “It *is* my home, asshat.”

I sigh. “You’re always welcome here, just…a heads up would be nice.”

“Heads up,” she grins. “I need a place to crash for a few days. Maybe a week.”

“And… Why is that?”

Again, Gabby has her own *very* expensive place in Soho.

She shrugs. “I’m having my place painted.”

I arch a brow. “When?”

“Now?” She shrugs. “I think they just got there.”

I stare at her. “I’m sorry—what?”

My sister sighs dramatically as she puts the half-empty water bottle back in the fridge, closes the door and then leans against it.

“I was tired of the all-white look. And I was talking to this cute bartender tonight, and his *cousin* owns an interior painting company. So…” She spreads her hands. “I think I’m going to go with Atmospheric Encore. It’s this great jewel-tone blue—”

“Back up,” I growl, frowning. “You hired painters *tonight* to go to your fucking apartment and start painting?”

She gives me a “duh” look.

“It *is* my place, Nero.”

“And we have protocols for a reason, Gabriella,” Dom grunts, sighing.

I turn to him. “Get some people over there asap. Make sure those fuckers aren't robbing her blind or installing cameras in the goddamn bathroom.”

Dom nods curtly, pulls out his phone and turns away to make a call. Gabby rolls her eyes at me.

“Is there a reason you think so little of me?”

“Well, hiring painters you met through your fucking *bartender* to paint your penthouse at four in the morning comes to mind.”

She flips me off. “I’m not *stupid*, Nero. I sent over some of that crew of bodyguards you insist on. They were there when the painters showed up. And if the job sucks?” She arches her brows. “Then I paint it back. It’s just *money*, Nero. I don’t think that’s exactly a rare resource with us?”

She sighs when my jaw tightens.

“Jesus, I was feeling spontaneous. So sue me.”

Dom walks back over, slipping his phone into his jacket pocket.

“In future, Ms. De Luca—”

“Yes, *Mr. Caruso*?” she fires back.

Dom inhales deeply. “In the future, if you’re feeling 'spontaneous', I’d ask that you kindly run it by me first. Especially if you’re sending members of your security detail off on unexpected errands.”

“Relax, Dom,” she says, walking over to the fruit bowl on the kitchen island. She plucks up an apple and takes a big, crunching bite out of it. “No security guards were harmed in the making of tonight’s bad decisions.”

“Glad to hear it,” he mutters, jaw ticking.

“Don’t be mad,” she coos, turning back to him. “I didn’t do anything dangerous.”

“Then why’d you ditch your detail?” he growls.

She shrugs. “Because they were boring?”

Dom’s mouth tightens and he doesn’t say anything as she steps close to him, just near enough to invade his space.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you missed me,” she teases.

“Go to bed, Gabriella,” he says flatly.

I clear my throat. “Woah—don’t you be giving my sister orders,” I growl.

He frowns, turning to me and shaking his head. “Sorry, boss.”

“No sweat,” I grin. “Just, that’s *my* job.” I turn to my sister. “Go to bed, Gabriella.”

Dom snickers next to me. Gabby flips us off with both hands, the apple between her teeth. She turns to saunter out of the room, then I stop her.

“Tomorrow,” I grunt. “Don’t make plans.”

“What if I have them already?” she asks, removing the apple.

“Cancel them. Leo Debolsky wants a meeting.”

She makes a face. “Gross. Leo’s a drunk asshole. Besides, I’m pretty sure business meetings with unsavory dickwads is your department, not mine.”

“Well, it’s yours tomorrow. Leo wants you there.”

She groans. “If this is some kind of arranged marriage thing, I swear to *God*—”

“Let's just see what he has to say, okay? Be there.”

She rolls her eyes dramatically.

“Gabby—”

“I’ll *be* there, okay?” she sighs. “Goodnight, Nero.”

“’Night, Gabby.”

“*Goodnight, Mr. Caruso*,” she teases a still-scowling Dom in a sing-song voice.

When she’s gone, he turns to me.

“You think there’s any leverage in the *world* that would rein that in?”

“*Nope*,” I shrug. “But it’s going to be fun as *fuck* to watch her sit there while Leo tells her he wants her as his blushing bride.”

* * *

"I'D LIKE to propose a marriage alliance between our families."

That's how Leo opens.

No hi-how-are-ya. No warmup. Just come out swinging, right out the gate.

I sit back in my chair, barely containing my sigh.

Called it.

Dom is next to me at the table, arms folded, face blank. Gabriella sits on my other side, legs crossed, twirling her hair like she's the bored star of a reality show.

"You're serious?" she asks, raising a perfectly manicured brow. "Like…marriage-marriage? *Us*?"

Leo smiles eagerly. "Yes! Look, Gabby—"

"It's Gabriella," she says flatly, even though almost everyone but Dom—who *insists* on calling her Gabriella, for some reason—calls her Gabby.

Leo nods. "Indeed. Well…*Gabriella*…I imagine you've got some preconceived notions of me. Things you've heard—"

"You asked me to blow you about seven seconds after you met me when you were visiting Knightsblood for a reunion," she says flatly.

My eyes instantly rip from my sister to Leo. Next to me, Dom suddenly looks pissed as fuck too, his jaw tightening and his hand clenching to a fist.

"*Excuse me*?" I snarl coldly.

Leo sighs sadly. "You have my *most sincere* apologies, Gabriella. I haven't had the best relationship with alcohol, and I'm ashamed of my past behavior." He looks right at me. "I humbly beg forgiveness from both of you. It's no excuse, but drinking brought out a bad side of me, and I no longer do. Drink, that is."

Gabby's lips purse as she fixes Leo with a beady look. "Apology…considered."

He smiles, dipping his chin.

"Look," Leo says. "I know it's an increasingly outdated idea, but a marriage between your family and mine would make us unstoppable. I bring connections, Nero. Total access to Bratva circles. Let's be honest—it's still hard for Italian families to fully integrate with the Russians."

I study him, my fingers tapping against the armrest of my chair.

"I bring so much to the table, Nero," he presses. "Doors you can't open alone. Opportunities it would be foolish to squander."

He's selling this, hard. But gradually I realize I'm not even listening, and not just because I knew before he walked in here that there was no way in *hell* I was going to trade my sister for any sort of alliance.

No, suddenly, I'm back in that bedroom, pulling back the covers, dragging my fingers along soft, flushed skin. Watching Milena move in her sleep when I touch her. Breathing in the smell of her. Listening to the sound she made when I brought her to the edge and then tipped her over it with just one finger.

"So, what do you say, Nero?" Leo asks, obnoxiously cutting into my daydreams of Milena's pretty, pink pussy.

"I'll think about it," I say flatly.

Gabby chokes on a laugh. "Wait. *What*!?"

Dom glares daggers at me. I hold up a hand and turn back to Leo.

"I will *think* about it," I growl. "Zero promises."

He smiles widely. "Of course. I appreciate you taking the time to consider it. Look, Nero, I really do bring connections and

alliances that your family could *hugely* benefit from. And I truly am a changed man, I promise."

He clears his throat delicately.

"However, I should add—and I don't mean this to sound confrontational—that there are other offers out there."

I tilt my head. "What?"

"For me," he says smoothly. "Other potential alliances. Other mafia princesses."

Gabby scoffs. "Go waste one of their afternoons, then."

Leo stands, as do I. I shake his hand, then I glance at Dom.

"Would you take Gabriella with you?"

Gabby shoots me a look and then subtly flips me off for good measure.

"Come along, princess," Dom mutters, taking her elbow.

"Don't *princess* me," she snaps. But she grudgingly allows him to escort her out.

When they're gone, I turn back to Nero.

"I'm curious: this proposed marriage. Which other families are you talking to?"

Leo laughs lightly. "Nero, you know I can't—"

He gasps as I grab him sharply by the collar, turning him so that I've got him pinned, slightly bent back over the table we were all just sitting at.

"What the *fuck*!" he blurts.

"You told my sister to *blow you* when she was, what, eighteen?"

He swallows against my hand.

"Nero, I wasn't in a good place then. I was using alcohol to—"

"I don't give a fuck about that," I growl. "But if I were *you*, I would give a huge number of fucks that I have put assholes in the *ground* for far less than insulting my sister like that."

I glare at him and then release his collar, letting him stand and straighten his shirt and jacket.

"*Who else* are you talking to."

He takes a deep breath. "The Kalishnik Bratva."

I go utterly still.

"I've been talking with Marko about possibly marrying his daughter, Milena."

There's a war inside my head. I don't even fully understand why I'm suddenly fighting it. But it's there, screaming and roaring and exploding in my psyche. It clashes with the daydreams I've been having this whole meeting of Milena—of putting my hands on her, of feeling her come undone last night.

Of how I feel when I watch her sleep.

My eyes drag venomously to Leo's. Somehow, I summon the mental strength to pull myself back from the brink of tearing him limb from limb.

"Interesting," I say expressionlessly.

He spreads his arms. "Truth be told, I'd much rather align with your family than Marko's. We might both be Russian, but you're the better match, between your influence and reach."

I get it: he's metaphorically sucking my dick to pump me up to his idea. I'm sure he pulled the same shit with Marko. But I'm no longer listening.

All I'm thinking about is *her*, and how she's mine.

No one else's.

No one.

14

MILENA

"BROOKLYN, YOU'RE UP."

Beside me, my friend blinks as we walk through the West Village.

"Remind me what we're playing again?"

Laz chuckles, shaking his head. "You've literally been walking with us for the last twenty minutes."

Brooklyn frowns. "I wasn't paying attention."

That's putting it mildly. About three blocks ago I asked her what she thought about a cute dress I saw in a shop window, and she answered with "both".

Whatever the fuck that meant.

A block later I guessed she was spacing out again, so I tested her by asking what her favorite ice cream flavor was.

"Totally, same," she'd replied.

So, yeah. Brooklyn might be *physically* with us, but mentally she's *miles* away, possibly in an alternate dimension.

The only reason I don't joke about it with her is that she also looks *exhausted*. Has for a few weeks now. And the last few days in the studio she was definitely dragging, which isn't like her.

I elbow her quietly in the side.

"Hey," I mutter. "You okay?"

"Just tired," she says. "I've been sleeping like shit."

"Well, it's still your turn," Laz butts in. "The game is marry, fuck, kill: Disney Princes edition."

Brooklyn gives him a look. "For reals?"

"For reals," he grins.

"Wow, lucky me," Brooklyn deadpans. "Are you two playing, too?" She nods past Laz to Bane.

"I don't see why not," Bane says in that slightly gravely tone of his. He shrugs, reaching a tattooed arm up to push his fingers through his dark hair.

"So which prince do *you* want to fuck, then?" I wink at him.

He snorts. "Nice bait and switch. Your friend Val put you up to that?"

Val can be a *thirsty* motherfucker, and he hasn't exactly been subtle in hinting at his interest in…what was it…yes, I think "topping Bane so thoroughly he starts attending Beyoncé Brunch unironically" were his exact words.

"He didn't!" I laugh. "But, out of curiosity…"

"Still straight," Bane shrugs. "Tell Val sorry."

"I'm sure he could work around that."

Bane rolls his eyes. “Terrific. Might be a problem for *me*.”

“Obviously, Antonov and I will be making them ‘princesses’ when it’s our turn,” Laz says. “Meanwhile, Brooklyn is totally dodging the question at hand.”

I grew up with Bane and Laz. So did Evie. It’s kind of unavoidable, given the tendency for Russian crime families to know each other, meet up on major holidays, and have fathers who generally enjoy drinking together.

Bane’s father Nikolai, the head of the Antonov Bratva, sits at the Iron Table along with people like Kir Nikolayev, and Evelina and Roman’s father, Pavel Nikitin. Meanwhile, Laz’s father runs the Kislev Bratva, which operates under the banner of the Antonov Bratva. Brooklyn, Evie, and I bumped into them outside of The Blind Tiger as we were walking past West 4th Street into the Village about half an hour ago, and they decided to tag along.

Laz is effortlessly cool: tall, sharp-featured, classically good looking in that model kind of way that’s *almost* obnoxious. He’s a bit of a charmer, but he’s a good guy.

As long as you don't cross him.

Bane is the exact opposite. Quiet. Viciously brooding. I’m not sure how else to put it other than there’s a darkness in him, like something broke and then got put back together not quite the way it was supposed to go.

He’s also got this focused intensity thing that most people find unnerving. I suppose that includes me, even though I’ve known him since we were kids. It’s not that I’m scared of him. I might sometimes be a little nervous imagining what he could be capable of, though.

Brooklyn sighs. “Okay, fine.” Her brows knit in concentration. “Marry…Prince Eric.”

Laz arches a brow. “As in *Little Mermaid*? Explain.”

Brooklyn shrugs. “He stays in love with her even after he realizes she’s literally half fish.” She grins. “*And* the wrong half—most men would probably agree, no?”

Laz makes a face. “Fair. Okay, marry Eric. Who are you fucking?”

She shrugs lightly. “Beast. *Obviously*.”

Bane chuckles. Laz rolls his eyes. Evie and I glance at each other and nod firmly.

“Facts,” Evelina blurts. “Like, no contest.”

“Wait, seriously?” Laz looks perplexed. “The big hairy monster?”

“Uh, *yeah*?” I giggle. “I mean, we’re talking about getting railed, not romance or marriage or whatever. Beast *for sure* knows how to fuck up your shit.”

Evie laughs and turns red. Brooklyn fist-bumps me. “Atta girl.”

“And kill?” Laz sighs, clearly getting bored.

“Also easy,” Brooklyn says. “Scar.”

“Oooo, good one!” Evelina blurts.

“What?” Laz makes a face. “That’s bullshit. He's not a prince.”

“Is so!” Brooklyn throws back. “He’s Mufasa’s brother. Mufasa is the king, which makes Scar a prince. He’s also a dick and kills Mufasa, so he can go fuck himself.”

Bane nods thoughtfully. “She’s got a point.”

Laz rolls his eyes. “Bullshit. Human princes only.”

“Do I still get to bang Beast?” Brooklyn asks hopefully.

Laz exhales heavily. “I think I’m done with this.”

“Join the club,” Bane mutters.

We stop playing the game, but the conversation stays on the topic of Disney princes—specifically, which of them is the most toxic. Florian from *Snow White* gets high marks for making out with an unconscious minor he finds in the woods. Aladdin gets a nod for all his lies about himself to trick Jasmine.

A participation award goes to Li Shang from *Mulan*—not for being toxic, but for *very obviously* being into men, and desperately trying to hide it from Mulan.

But even as I try to remain present in the conversation, my thoughts keep returning to the alarm bell going off in my head that cannot be ignored.

A very loud alarm bell named Nero.

Speaking of toxic…

I've been avoiding him. Not responding to his numerous text messages. I'm almost sure I saw him lurking in a blood-red Porsche outside the Mercury before rehearsal the other day. I hid out in the coffee shop across the street to avoid walking past him. Madame Kuzmina made me pay for my lateness with an extra round of brutal conditioning.

But still.

Worth it.

Because this has moved in a *seriously* insane new direction.

He was in my room again. This time, he made sure there was *zero* confusion about whether I had dreamed it or not.

This time, he left evidence.

Sticky, dried evidence, all over my body and soaked into my panties and tank top.

He snuck in. He touched me again.

He *came on me*.

I should be terrified. Furious. And maybe I am. But not as much as I should be.

Instead, I…don't know how to feel.

Actually, that's a lie. I know *exactly* how I feel. I'm just not ready to say it out loud. Try as I might to force myself to be horrified and disgusted by his total disregard for my boundaries, my body, my consent, and so much more, I keep finding myself unable to be as angry as I should be.

Brooklyn is going off about Prince Charming from *Cinderella* and his obvious foot fetish. "Not to mention how fucking stupid he is. I mean he spent the whole night dancing with her, and he doesn't just, like, *recognize her fucking face?*"

Meanwhile, I'm lost in thought, drowning in the memory of the fever dream that turned out to be real. To waking up and feeling his dried *cum* on my body.

I lick my lips, slipping my phone out of my bag and tapping on the exchange I've read a million times but have yet to respond to. I don't even know how he got my number, to be honest.

NERO

Next time, sleep in nothing. It'll save me time, and you some laundry.

Right. He's also not even *remotely* trying to deny what he did.

At. All.

NERO

Your mouth made the hottest little moans when I rolled your clit with my fingers. I wonder how those moans would feel with your lips around my dick.

NERO

Maybe that's how I'll wake you up next time. With my cock stretching your pretty mouth wide open.

I mean… *This* is what I'm dealing with. Even if I *was* going to respond…I mean, how the fuck do you even reply to that? A

freaking thumbs up emoji?

NERO

Have you washed your sheets or clothes yet, or do they still have me all over them.

NERO

I'm hoping for the latter. I might be developing a fetish for you covered in my cum, always.

NERO

Does your pretty pussy miss me, little princess?

NERO

You can ignore me all you want, Milena. I'll still see you soon.

I close the app before the pulse between my thighs can get any worse.

God, he's sick. So am I, for getting turned on by this.

But *why*?

That's the question I can't answer. How much of this is me actually *wanting* this brand of depravity and ultra-dark kinkiness, and how much is guilt.

Because there's an inconvenient truth here that I can't ignore: my family destroyed his. Papa's men *killed his father and mother* on that night of violence and mayhem. Almost killed Nero himself.

I've carried that with me for four years, tucked deep inside. I've never told anyone. Never said it out loud.

But it's always lingered there, like a sickness.

So…*do* I want this brand of crazy that Nero's brought into my life? *Am* I turned on by him sneaking into my room, touching me, and coming all over my body while I sleep? Or is it just that some fucked-up part of me thinks I deserve it?

Regardless, it doesn't explain how I crave more every time I even think about him. Doesn't explain why I can't stop wondering what comes next.

"Oooo!"

I'm yanked from my thoughts quite literally by Evie tugging on my arm. "Let's go in here! This place is adorable."

I look up and blink in surprise when I see that we're outside a super-cute, Parisian-themed used bookstore. Then that predictable feeling flickers to life.

"I thought we were looking for dresses," Brooklyn sighs.

"We are. Later," Evelina declares. "I just want to browse a little. Plus, I want a photo of that mirror in the back."

I follow them in, grateful for the chance to focus on something other than my thoughts.

The store smells like old paper and leather. Every surface is stacked—books on books on books. Dusty hardcovers, yellowing paperbacks with crinkled and worn spines, even a whole section of vintage pinup magazines, which is really cool. A turntable near the register plays soft, scratchy jazz.

Evie is snapping away at the vintage mirror on the back wall that she spotted from outside, asking the shopkeeper where she got it. Brooklyn is with Bane, browsing the old *Playboys* and other pinup magazines.

I drift toward the fiction section. I know exactly what I'm looking for, because at this point, it's a freaking compulsion. Bookstore? Library? Must go in and look.

The Sorrows of Young Werther.

Part of me looks for it because it holds such nostalgia for me. It's the book that got me through the dark times when my mom died. And of course, it's also the book that led me to *him*.

But there's another reason I look, especially in used shops.

The night of violence, when I ran from my pen pal's embrace and returned home to learn the truth about my family's war on Nero's, our correspondence ended.

We never exchanged names, or numbers, or emails. The only way we could reach each other was between the pages of a book in the New York Public Library.

I was in lockdown for a week after that night—Uncle Levka's orders. I learned later from Papa that Levka had actually used outside muscle to go after the De Lucas, to minimize blowback on our family. Papa told me he hated that that had been the case, but he also swore me to secrecy.

To this day, I don't know if anyone but Papa, Levka, and I know that *our family* was behind the De Luca tragedy.

I honestly get the sense that Papa is still embarrassed that it happened at all, even though it's pretty much the event that shocked him into recovery. I firmly believe it jump-started his body into fighting harder to kill that fucking cancer, so he could get back in charge of the empire.

After that lockdown ended, though, the first thing I did was go to the main branch. I wanted to tell him everything, tell him how sorry I was for what happened to him and his family. I had a tear-stained letter in hand, spilling my guts, telling him I was pretty sure I'd fallen in love with him.

That I still wanted masks, but I wanted him without them, too.

But when I got there that day, there was no book. It wasn't checked out, but it wasn't where it was supposed to be, or in any other of our spots.

I tore that library apart for *months* looking for it. But it was gone.

Eventually, one of the librarians figured out what I was doing and took pity on me. She told me gently that sometimes older books were rounded up off the shelves and either donated or sold to used book stores, and that sometimes a human error would make it look like the book was still in the library system, when it wasn't.

So that's why I look in old shops like this.

I'm not just looking for any copy of *The Sorrows of Young Werther.* I'm looking for *the* copy.

Our copy.

It's a shot in the dark, and I doubt I'll ever find it, but it never hurts to look.

When I get to the Classics section, I scan the shelves for a minute before I find the G's. There's a battered, but not super old, paperback that includes part one and two of Goethe's *Faust*. But no *Werther*.

I sigh, turning to go find Evie. Suddenly, I freeze when I see it.

Not on a shelf.

…In Laz's hands.

He's leaning against the edge of a bookcase in the corner, flipping through a battered copy of it. It's not *the* copy, I can tell from here, but still.

I stop mid-step. Laz looks up, eyebrows raised. "You okay?"

I stare at him, then the book. My throat works. "Uh, yeah…" I chew on my lip and nod at the book in his hands. "Have you read much Goethe before?"

He holds it up. "Oh, for sure." He shrugs. "I actually love this one. It's one of my favorite books. Sad, but great. Weirdly, it also perks me up when I'm in a slump?"

He goes back to his reading, like it's nothing.

My thoughts are spiraling.

My pen pal loved that book, too. He said it made him feel like he wasn't alone in his worst moments.

My pen pal also told me his family was mafia. He said he had a younger sister. That he didn't sleep much, and that the night felt more honest than the day.

My nerves are suddenly jangling.

Laz's family is mafia. He's got a younger sister, Galina, at Knightsblood right now.

He's a notorious night owl and insomniac.

My gaze flicks to his eyes.

They're fucking *green*. I've seen his eyes a million times, but never noticed it before.

I feel dizzy.

For four years, I've been fucking *certain* it was Nero.

But what if I'm wrong?

"Milena?" Brooklyn calls from the front. "Come on, we're going to hit Maison Aurore down the block."

I blink. Laz is already tucking the book under his arm like he's going to buy it. The moment passes, like it never happened.

I nod in a numb haze and fall in with the others as we exit the shop. The sun's getting lower, the breeze a little cooler now.

Brooklyn grabs Evelina's hand and leads the charge like she's storming Normandy. I follow behind them, quiet.

Thinking.

Spiraling.

Unsure what cracked open in my chest when I saw Laz with that book just now.

What if the man from the warehouse that night wasn't Nero at all.

What if it was Laz.

Green eyes. Tall. Gorgeous. Charming. Mafia family. Younger sister. Reads Goethe.

I feel myself tingling as I glance at him out of the corner of my eye as he walks next to me, talking to Bane about who-knows-what. I stumble when he suddenly glances at me, his brows knitting.

"Shit, sorry, were *you* going to buy this?" He holds up the copy of *Werther*.

"Nope," I blurt quickly. A little awkwardly.

He frowns. "Okayyy?"

"Great book," I mumble before hurrying to catch up with Evie and Brooklyn.

Maison Aurore is just two blocks over. Very high-end, curated, seriously *great* stuff. I've spent *way* too much here over the years.

Brooklyn is already flipping through hangers. Evelina follows with bouncy interest. I break off and drift toward a rack of slip dresses.

Maybe a distraction will help.

"Oh, *hell yes*." I turn. Brooklyn's nodding at the dress I've stopped at—an electric violet sequined thing with a hint of glittery silver threading through it.

"You *have* to buy that."

I snort. "How about I try it *on* first?"

She rolls her eyes. "Amex black cards are *wasted* on some people."

I smack her arm, making her giggle.

Brooklyn knows I *hate* being labeled as a mafia princess or some privileged trust fund brat with Daddy's credit card. Obviously, I'm insanely fortunate. I live in a virtual castle. I want for nothing. I could almost certainly buy this whole store…*if*

I had my father's credit card.

But I don't—and I don't want to. Obviously, my needs are taken care of, but what I spend on myself is my own money from my dance career. Which ain't much.

"*Bitch*," I tease.

She grins back. "Oooo, touchy-touchy. Seriously, buy that. It's gorgeous. If you don't, I'm buying it *for* you."

Unlike myself, Brooklyn comes from *nothing*. What she has, she's worked her fucking ass off for.

She's *not* buying me a five-hundred-dollar dress.

"Let me go try it on."

She smirks. "Much better."

Laz and Bane are outside the shop where Bane is smoking a cigarette. Brooklyn wanders over to where the salesclerk is helping Evie hold up an array of bubbly pink gowns in front of a mirror.

I take the dress with me to the back of the store, slipping down a small hallway and into one of the dressing rooms, closing the door behind me. I turn to face the floor-length mirror, gazing at my reflection for a minute.

What if it's Laz…

I shake the thought away, turning from the mirror to hang up the dress. I strip down to my bra and panties, pluck the dress off the hanger, and tug it down over my head. My hair tumbles over my face, briefly turning my world platinum blonde before I find the armholes and the neck.

That's when it happens.

A hand slams over my mouth, stifling the scream as it tears from my throat. A heavy, muscled weight slams into me, one hand pinning me to the mirror as the other grabs my hip possessively.

Lips tickle my ear, making the hairs on the nape of my neck stand up as heat ripples down my spine.

"*Miss me, princess*?"

15

NERO

I STILL HAVEN'T FIGURED out why I've just *cornered* her, as opposed to the cat and mouse shit of stalking her in her sleep and sending her outrageous texts.

Part of me wants to say I've grown bored of the games. Or that my dick is tired of me jerking it like it owes me money and wants the real thing.

Her mouth. Her soft, pouty lips wrapped around me as her tongue strokes my swollen head. Her pussy, pink and dripping, tight around my cock as I sink into her willing little hole. Her ass, so fucking tight that I know I'd have to *force* my way in, her panties stuffed in her mouth as she shattered for me.

But there's a more confusing explanation too: that my desire for this girl became dangerously close to *obsessive* in a feral, unhinged way the second that fucker Leo mentioned he might be marrying her.

If I'm being honest with myself…which isn't always the case…*that's* what ignited the urge to come here.

Finding her was easy enough, thanks to the little microdot tracker I tucked between her phone and its case the other night at her house. The tricky part was slipping around the back of the store to avoid Bane and Laz, who I did *not* realize were out with her, and avoiding her friends as I crept down the back hallway.

But now, she's *mine*.

Trapped. And at my mercy.

The lighting in here is soft and flattering. A velvet chaise. White walls. *Quiet*.

And she's standing in the center of it, frozen; barely into the dress she's trying on as I hold her against the mirror.

She doesn't scream. Doesn't try to fight.

Good girl.

Her breath is unsteady and halting. Her big blue eyes are wide, her pulse throbbing in the hollow of her neck. Her lips are parted, like she doesn't know whether to moan or tell me to go to hell.

"I don't like being ignored, princess," I murmur darkly into her ear. "I also don't like being stood up. What happened to you the other night?"

She shakes her head, almost imperceptibly.

"Were you scared, princess?" My voice drops near her ear. "Or were you just hoping I'd *chase you* like I promised?"

I trail a fingertip down her side, teasing over her ribs beneath the dress. I feel her tremble under my touch, the lean muscles of her back coiling in the low light.

"I think I've already demonstrated how *poor* a hiding place your bedroom is."

She flushes immediately—neck to cheeks. I catch it in the mirror and grin.

"You should lock your windows," I murmur. "Or don't. I like the invitation."

Milena shivers, her body trembling deliciously against mine as I press myself harder to her.

“Did you have sweet dreams that night?” I purr. “When I visited you? When I felt your greedy little pussy throb around my fingers?”

She gasps softly against the mirror and shuts her eyes. My fingers slide up to her shoulder and the straps of the dress.

“Your little pussy made me *so fucking hard*, princess,” I growl into her neck. “And then I got even harder when I watched my cum splatter all over your skin.”

“*You…*” She shudders, her eyes still closed. “*You’re sick*.”

“Am I?” I grin, brushing my lips over her nape. “What does that make *you*?”

“*A victim*,” she chokes.

I chuckle quietly. “Hmm. Your pussy seems have a different opinion.”

I start to drag the straps down, slowly enough that she can feel every single movement.

Her eyes open again. When they meet mine in the mirror, there’s no more protest.

Only fire.

I ease the fabric off her shoulders, one strap at a time. The dress slips down easily, like the damn thing *wants* to fall off. And when it drops to her feet, Milena shivers, her muscles clenching tighter as I press against her.

My chest to her back. My throbbing dick nestled between the taut, tight globes of her ass, split by a little black thong.

My hand slides down to her hip, fingers trailing possessively over her skin as her breath starts to come faster.

“I feel I owe you an apology, princess.”

Her blue eyes snap to mine in the mirror, rippling with heat.

“It was rude of me, really.” I lean down, brushing my lips across her earlobe and bringing a whimper to her throat as my hand strokes her hip. “I didn’t even say goodbye after I covered you in my cum.”

She sucks in her breath. Her thighs press together.

My hand begins to slide around her hip, pushing over her stomach, feeling her tighten under my touch. My fingertips brush the front of her thong, teasing along the lace waistband before deftly slipping underneath.

Milena gasps quietly, her body tensing as it subtly presses back into me.

Such an eager little thing…

I slide my hand lower, feeling the warmth of her soft skin before my fingers slip into her molten, wet heat. Milena’s mouth opens, a silent moan catching in her throat as my fingers stroke through her velvety soft lips and up and down her slit, rolling over her swollen clit.

My back teeth grind, my cock bulging hard against her ass as I feel how fucking wet she is. How *needy* her cunt is for me.

“As I said, princess,” I growl quietly, “it would appear *you* and *your pussy* have conflicting opinions about me.”

“*You can’t just—*” She gasps sharply as I rub a finger slowly around her throbbing clit. “You can’t just…”

“Can’t just what, princess?” I murmur. “Walk in here, pin you to the mirror, and put my hands wherever I fucking want?”

“*Y-yes*,” she chokes.

“And yet…”

Her eyes bulge and her mouth drops into a soft “O” as I sink two fingers deep into her greedy little hole.

“*Here we are*,” I whisper in her ear. I start to ease my fingers in and out, feeling how wet she is as I stroke her g-spot.

“Would you like to know what I did to you while you slept?” I growl.

She nods, gasping, her eyes half-closed and her body melting against me.

“Use your words, princess.”

She whimpers.

“*Yes*,” she blurts.

“Yes, *what*.”

Her brow furrows, and I swear her pussy clenches a bit tighter around my fingers.

“Yes, I want to know what you did to me while I was sleeping.”

“*Good girl*.”

Her pussy *melts* when I say that.

“All right… First, I watched you while you slept.”

My fingers sink into her.

“And I got *very fucking hard* watching you squirm in your sleep, debating what I’d do to you. I thought maybe I'd use your mouth…”

She whimpers as I slide my other hand up and wrap my fingers around her throat.

“And I wondered how roughly I could fuck your pretty mouth before you’d wake. Wondered if I fucked it hard enough your fingers would find your needy little pussy even in sleep.”

Milena is panting and trembling as my fingers thrust roughly in and out of her, filling the room with wet, squelching sounds. My other hand slides from her throat to her jaw, cupping it before I run two fingers over her soft lips.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you, princess…” I murmur. “You’d *like it* if I woke you up by using your pretty mouth as my personal fuck-hole.”

I don’t even need to push. Unbidden, her lips part. My cock pulses as I slip two fingers into her hot little mouth and feel her lips wrap around them.

“*Suck, baby girl*,” I murmur into her ear.

Her tongue sweeps over my fingers, and I groan as I grind my thick cock against her ass and plunge my fingers into her greedy little cunt.

“I pulled your tank top up and ran my hands all over your tits. Your little pink nipples turned me on even more, princess. They got so fucking *hard* when I twisted and pinched them.”

I slip my wet fingers from her mouth and drop my hand to her breasts to cup one of them. My spit-soaked fingers pinch a throbbing nipple through her bra, and I relish how sweetly she gasps. How the little nub pebbles under my rough touch. How her body comes alive for me.

My hand slides lower, fingers slipping under the bottom of her bra cups before I push them up, spilling her breasts free. Milena moans, shaking as I take one in my hand again, roughly pinching and twisting her ghostly pink nipple until she’s squirming and full-on humping my hand.

“What an eager, *horny* little princess I’ve found…”

Her only response is a choked moan. There’s a faraway look in her eyes, like she’s lost the power of speech as her pussy clenches, dripping all over my fingers.

“I took your shorts off next,” I rasp into her ear. “Then your panties.”

She whines when my fingers leave her pussy. But then I’m twisting my hand, grabbing her panties and yanking them down her thighs. My hand slides right back up to cup her messy little cunt, and when my fingers plunge back in, she gasps in pleasure.

“You were *so fucking wet* already,” I murmur, nipping her earlobe. “And your pretty, pink pussy was *so* fucking inviting, I just had to take out my cock.”

She lets out a low, whimpered moan, shamelessly humping my fingers as I squeeze and pinch and roll her nipples with my other hand. Her breath mists the mirror, her hands clawed against it as I rake my teeth down the nape of her neck.

"You came so sweetly for me, princess," I growl. "Like such a good girl, making such a mess of my fingers. In fact, you did so well that I decided to reward you…"

Her body clenches, her pussy strangling my fingers as her breath catches sharply, muscles tightening.

"So I sprayed my cum all over your stomach, and your pussy, and your cute little pink nipples, until you were fucking *covered* in me."

Her eyes bulge wide and then scrunch tightly shut as she lets out a cry. Her body spasms and clenches, her pussy squeezing and pulsing around my fingers as she comes apart for me. Her muscles jerk, her back arching violently as the orgasm slams through her.

Then she goes slack in my grip, my fingers inside her and my hand around her body cupping her breast the only things keeping her on her feet.

That's okay.

She doesn't need to stand anymore.

I slide my fingers out of her spasming pussy and ease her to her knees. She makes a cooing little whimper as I grab her high, blonde ponytail—*fuck me*, this ponytail—and twist her head around.

I swear to fuck, I get even *harder* when she turns on her own, like she knows what's coming.

Fucking *eager* for it.

My belt jangles. My zipper yanks down before I pull my swollen, heavy cock free just as she turns to face me, and her eyes widen in shock. Her pink lips literally fall open as she stares at my throbbing dick.

I grin.

Thank you, genetics.

"Open wide, princess," I groan, fisting my cock as I grip her ponytail and tug her head back. "Open that pretty little mouth so that I can *fuck it*."

She looks so fucking beautiful on her knees like that, bra pulled up, tits out, panties tangled around her thighs.

Glazed, needy look in her eyes.

Then her mouth falls open.

I thrust in brutally, jamming my fat cock into the back of her throat. She chokes a little, but as I'm pulling back out, her lips wrap tight around me.

Her blue eyes clash with my green ones.

Her lips tighten around my swollen dick.

I think my little princess wants the challenge.

With a groan, that's exactly what I give her. I don't build up to it, don't let her get used to my size. I'm not even sure I'd say I proceed to *fuck* her mouth.

More like *use it*.

Sloppy, wet *gluck* sounds fill the dressing room as I fuck my cock between her pouty soft lips. I groan, my spit-soaked dick sliding wetly in and out of her greedy throat like I own it.

I wrap that fucking ponytail around my fist, gliding my swollen head over her teasing tongue. Feel her pouty lips stretch tight around my girth. Feel her throat spasm and work at my dick as I ram deep.

Not *once* do her eyes stray from mine. They don't blink, just stare defiantly and yet obediently into mine as she chokes and

spits and slobbers on my cock.

I'm not going to last. Not with this mouth. Not with those eyes stabbing into mine. Not with *that fucking ponytail*.

"Remember, princess," I groan, rolling my hips, my abs flexing as I fuck my fat cock deep. "*Good girls swallow every last drop*."

She moans around my dick, nodding her head, her eyes fucking *still* on mine.

That's what shatters whatever control I have left: those fucking eyes, never once looking away.

With a deep groan, I feel my muscles clench and my balls draw up tight. My cock pulses and swells, and suddenly, I'm *exploding* into her mouth.

Not coming. Not "releasing". Not spilling.

Detonating.

I hiss, staring right into her eyes as my cock pulses and jumps, twitching in her mouth, blasting spurt after spurt of cum across her tongue and down her throat. Milena moans and whimpers, gulping and swallowing, still sucking my dick until I have to forcibly pull her away.

Her mouth slips off my swollen head with a wet pop. Our eyes are still locked, that same fiery, defiant *need* blazing in hers.

"Show me," I murmur.

A blush blooms on her face. But slowly, still looking up at me, with my heavy, swollen cock bobbing in front of her face, Milena opens her mouth.

It's filled with my pearly white cum.

Her lips close. She doesn't blink as her throat works. Her little pink tongue darts out to lick her lips clean, and then slowly, she opens wide again.

Her mouth is empty.

"*Good girl*," I groan.

I reach down and run my thumb over her chin, wiping the last traces of cum and spit from her flushed face.

She's still on her knees, eyes hazy, lips parted, chest rising and falling.

And yet, she's still looking at me like she wants more.

The good news is, *she's fucking going to get it*.

I tuck my cock back into my pants, zip up, then lower myself to my haunches as I cup her cheek.

"I assume," I murmur, my eyes locked on hers, "that last time, when you *didn't* show up, it was because you were annoyed with me for not letting you come."

Her breath catches.

"That's no longer an issue, is it."

She shakes her head, looking dazed.

"*Good*."

I lean down and press my mouth to her ear.

"Tomorrow night. Greymoor. Eleven sharp."

She shudders.

"Don't be late, princess. And *do not* stand me up again."

I straighten up and take one last look at her—panties still around her thighs, bra pushed up, dress on the floor, lips swollen.

Then I turn and walk out without saying goodbye.

I think I want to give up control.

Not in the cute, flirty way. Not the "tie me up a little" way. I mean really give it up. Well, to be specific (and maybe a little graphic...), have it taken from me by force.

I want to be used.

Which sounds so fucking wrong. And I'd never in a million years tell anyone about it in real life because it makes me sound like some kind of turbo slut.

Me. The virgin.

I hate this about myself. I hate that it's in my head and won't get out. I hate how much I want it.

Don't judge me.

(But I know you won't.)

-Me

16

MILENA

I DON'T KNOW what the fuck I'm doing here.

Okay, I *do,* it's just that my brain is still trying to figure out *why*.

…Shit. I know the "why", too. It's firmly wrapped up with the "what".

Not to mention, the raging, roaring, *black* aches and desires that sink their claws into me, and have done so ever since I was old enough to understand what wanting something *that way* meant.

I was popular growing up. I'm pretty, I come from money and power, I've always had nice stuff. My father also taught me to have a backbone—to demand respect, yes, but to treat others with it too. To be kind.

It's really that last one that makes all the difference.

Being popular, I had plenty of other popular friends. But none of them ever really *felt* like friends. The girls were *mean*, frankly, if not outright cruel. Catty. Two-faced. Every single one would smile at you while plotting how best to stab you in the back over something ludicrously unimportant, like being prom queen.

The guys were just as bad. They were overly macho in a cringey, blustery way. They were pompous and cocky. And vain. I never understood how someone could be that wealthy, powerful and privileged, and *still* be an asshole.

Anyway, I ended up getting a reputation as being an "ice queen" in high school. It's amazing, the shitty names spoiled rich douchebags call you when you don't want to give them hand jobs in the backs of their Porsches.

Most of it, obviously, was that the guys were *shitheads*. They were loud, rude, obnoxious, and pushy. But also, by high school I'd already figured out that there was a darkness inside me.

Most girls fantasize about beds of roses, handsome princes sweeping them off their feet and cheesy rom-com meet-cutes. I never wanted that.

I *definitely* didn't want to give a blowjob to a preppy douchebag in the back seat of his sports car. But… I didn't want Prince Charming, either. Didn't want roses and grand gestures, or candlelit dinners—okay, maybe I did, but not like in the movies.

When I fantasized, when I let my mind wander to heated places, I didn't dream of swoony kisses out of *The Notebook*. I didn't want the blonde guy with dimples and a chin instead of a personality to sweep me into his arms during a sunset.

I wanted to get chased through the dark by a guy in a Jason mask, thrown down, smacked around, and fucking *railed* until I couldn't walk.

But there was no fucking way in hell any of the guys in high school were capable of doing that for me, even if I had been crazy enough to *ask*.

I shiver, sucking my lower lip between my teeth as I look up at the front of Greymoor Manor. I've been standing here for five minutes. Maybe ten.

Anyway, I know *why* I'm here: because as much as he might scare me, Nero can offer me something dark, depraved, and deliciously deviant that I've only ever been able to explore once before.

…with *him*, I've always thought. Guessed. Imagined.

After seeing Laz in the store holding that book the other day, I'm not so sure.

Nero fits the profile. He's crazy, and feral, and has that wolfish glint in his eyes. You could meet him for the first time and sense in a matter of minutes that he's *exactly* the sort of person who's into consensual non-consent play and chasing girls through the dark.

Laz, on the other hand, is kind. Charming. He's…well…*not* crazy and feral. And on the one hand, that makes it hard to imagine him being into that sort of stuff.

But then again, would anyone meet *me* and think I'm anything but a good girl who's into vanilla sex? I mean, yeah, I can be brassy, and loud, and I've never once been mistaken for a doormat. But I sincerely doubt anyone would ever meet me and guess that my "thing" is getting tackled to the ground and forced, or having my panties torn off and stuffed in my mouth as I get fucked like a whore.

Or men in masks who don't listen to the word "no".

I take a shaky breath, trying to exhale the confusion from my lungs.

Tonight, it doesn't matter who *he* was, back then. Laz. Nero. Someone else, even.

Tonight, I know damn well who I'm here to meet. To run from. To be *ravaged* by.

And I know exactly why I'm here.

I want this.

…At least, I'm pretty sure I do.

That's what finally gets me walking across the street to Greymoor. I'm not early this time, so no chance of watching another fucking double murder, thank God.

My brow furrows as that replays in my head. But like dwelling on the past, I've elected to shove that from my mind.

I *know* who Nero is. I know the empire he controls, and what the job can entail.

I'm still here, my blood pounding through my veins like liquid fire.

…A throbbing heat pooling between my thighs.

The code to the lock on the front door has changed. Nero texted the new one to me earlier, along with a reminder not to be late.

He also reminded me of my safe word: Vanquish.

But it came with a warning: use it, and it's not just tonight that's over. It's *all* of it, permanently.

And that's how I know I've already drunk the Kool-Aid. Because the man literally gave me a way out. Forever.

And I'm still here.

The hinge of the door creaks as I push it open, then does so even louder when I close it behind me again with a sharp, final *click*.

The grand foyer is dark, the only lights coming from the street lamps outside and the general glow of the city.

My eyes immediately latch onto a piece of paper taped to the finial at the bottom of the ornately carved banister on the sweeping staircase, and I quietly walk over.

It's a note, with just four words on it.

Run run run, princess…

Vanquish.

For half a second, the word teases the tip of my tongue, asking to be let out so it can stop this madness.

But I shove it back down, and fucking *bury* it. No going back now.

I step out of my shoes and drop them by the front door, leaving my socks on.

My throat tightens. My hands are shaking. *All* of me is shaking.

The house is totally silent. Not a single creak of a footstep, not one whisper of him slipping through the shadows. But I know he's here. I can feel his dark energy oozing from every crevice in the walls. Feel his green eyes on me, even if I can't see them.

I take one last, steadying breath. In. Out.

Then, I run.

I vaguely remember the layout of the first floor, so that's where I stay, sprinting into the room with the bookshelves that I rifled through the last time. My breath is tight in my throat, already loud as I bolt through that room into the next.

I have no idea where I'm going. Even less idea where he might be waiting for me, ready to pounce.

Behind any door. Hidden in any shadow. Lingering in any creak of an old floorboard as I skitter across the floor.

I run down another corridor, but suddenly, instead of a room, there's just a turn in the hallway, and a locked door.

Fuck.

My pulse jangles and my skin turns clammy as I whirl and rush back the way I came. I turn left through another room, but… shit…even *that one* seems different from last time.

It's like the house itself is shifting, helping him find me.

Like it *wants* me caught.

There's a creak behind me. My heart lurches, my pulse hammering in my veins as I spin on unsteady feet, gaping into the darkness.

Nothing. No hands reaching for me. No leering green eyes piercing into me.

I start to run again, darting through another grand salon and then down a dusty, ancient hallway, until I reach another staircase at the back of the house.

This time, I bolt up to the second floor as my senses wail, alarm bells I'm willfully ignoring.

Run.

Leave this madness.

We are the survival instincts that have kept your stupid species alive for millennia. Stop fucking ignoring us, idiot.

I'm barreling down another hallway when I hear them.

Footsteps, slow and measured.

Not like I'm being chased.

Like I'm being *hunted*.

A panicky thought suddenly surfaces in my head that if Nero's *not* my old pen pal, I really don't know him at all. The few times I've been alone with him have involved him violently undressing me and putting his hands on me. Touching me and making me come, regardless of consent. He did it while I was fucking *asleep*, for God's sake. The last time I saw him here, he killed two people right in front of me without blinking an eye.

That is who I'm allowing to chase me through the dark and fuck me however he wants when he catches me?

I must be *insane*.

My chest tightens. I dart left, down a narrower corridor, past broken picture frames and faded wallpaper.

Another creak behind me. I whirl, a choked gasp ripping from my lips. Just as I'm peering into the darkness, the sound comes again, still behind me.

My nerves are out of control, my skin prickling into goosebumps as a cold shiver drags down my spine like the edge of a blade.

My breath catches in my throat. My tongue feels heavy and numb as I slowly creep away from the sound as it comes yet again.

“I’ll make you a deal, *princess*.”

I almost scream when his voice cuts through the dark like a serrated blade. Every nerve in my body spasms. Every inch of my skin turns to ice.

“Stay put, and I’ll make it quick.”

My breath freezes in my lungs. The hammering of my pulse fills my ears.

“But if you keep *running*, princess,” he growls, “I’ll make it fucking *messy*. I’ll make it hurt. I will use every fucking hole you have until I’ve left every last drop of my cum in and on you.”

My eyes bulge into the blackness.

“What’s it going to be, Milena?” he murmurs. “Although, for the record, I can already *smell* how fucking wet your pretty cunt is from here.”

I start to back up again. A low, dark chuckle floats from the darkness.

“What’s wrong, baby?” he sneers. “You were so brave when you walked in. Well, after you’d spent fifteen minutes outside trying to talk yourself into it.”

My face heats. My feet keep moving me back, away from him and his lunacy. His madness. His dangerous, dark allure.

“This house is *mine*, princess. Every hallway. Every room. Every fucking *shadow*…including, by the way, the one you’re trying to hide in *right now*.”

The floor creaks underfoot as I take another step back.

“But *I. See. YOU.*”

The last “you” comes snarling out of the darkness *right next to me*. And this time, I scream, loudly, before I spin and *bolt*.

My lungs seize as my socks slide over the polished wood, the floor groaning beneath me with every step. I don’t look back. I *can’t*.

Because now, I can feel him pounding after me, his breath teasing the nape of my neck as imaginary claws reach out to grab me.

The house bends and shifts around me. Shadows stretch and contract. The very wallpaper seems to breathe. Every corner feels like teeth, and every open doorway looks like a gaping maw, waiting to swallow me whole.

I shove past a cracked hallway table, nearly tripping on a loose rug. The main stairs up to the third floor loom ahead. There’s no rhyme or reason to my running anymore.

Now, it's all about survival.

I get to the staircase, reaching for the banister to charge up to the third floor.

Suddenly, an iron grip closes around my ankle. I shriek when my leg is yanked out from under me, sending me sprawling and crashing into the steps.

My kneecap slams into the hardwood stair, and pain flashes up my thigh. But he’s already on me. *Everywhere.*

My survival instinct kicks in, turning me from passive victim to a fighting demon. I lash out, jamming my heel back. He grunts and dodges, and my heel slams into his thigh instead of his balls.

He grabs my ponytail in a fist, yanking my head back so viciously that the roots of my hair scream for mercy. I jab an elbow back, and I’m rewarded with a grunt as I slam into something relatively soft. The hand releases its grip, and I start to scramble up the stairs...

I barely make it three steps.

His weight crashes into me, sending me crashing back down. I whirl, nails out, raking them over his bare skin as he roars with pain. He grabs me by the throat, but I slam my forearm into him, and when his grip loosens, my hand moves on its own, rearing

back and then *slapping him*.

For one silent second, horror rushes into my face, and my eyes go wide.

Then heat blooms across *my* cheek, utterly stunning me.

He just slapped me back.

…and I didn't hate it.

This is part of the sickness I'll never be rid of. A black part of my soul that fucking *craves* it.

Submission not because I'm submissive, but because it's been *wrested* from me.

As the heat stings my cheek, an even darker one throbs between my legs.

I lash out again, but it's futile. A pathetic whimper chokes from my throat as he easily stops my fist, flips me over, and sends me crashing against the stairs again.

I jolt, panting and gasping, my knees on one stair, my elbows two higher, and my cheek pressed to the one above that. I cry out when he yanks on my ponytail again, arching my spine.

A blubbering moan tumbles from my lips as he grabs the back of my yoga pants in his fist and yanks them down to my knees. I try to kick and fight, but his open palm crashes once, twice, three times against my ass, making me scream and yelp as heat explodes across my tender skin.

Nero spanks me again before he grabs the lace of my thong between the globes of my ass and rips it down my legs.

"*That's* it, baby," he snarls as he spanks my ass again, tearing a scream from my lips. "*Struggle*. Fucking *fight me*. It only gets me harder. It only makes me want to ruin this pretty little cunt even more."

My leg kicks out again, but he knocks it to the side and yanks my ponytail harder, grunting. Pain and pleasure explode through my system, making me drunk on the madness of it all.

"Uh-uh-uh, princess," he snarls, spanking me again, *hard*. A squeal wrenches from my throat as my core clenches. "You don't get to tap out," he growls. "You begged for this. And now you'll take it like the good little whore you are."

A sob of pleasure erupts from deep inside me as he rams two of his fingers into my pussy. I'm *soaked,* but even still, the words "gentle" and "Nero" have never once been uttered in the same sentence.

The breath is knocked from me as he shoves his fingers deep inside, making my eyes bulge as I choke on another cry. He starts sawing his fingers in and out of me, making sloppy wet noises that fill the darkness around us.

"You're such a filthy, messy, eager little thing. Tell me, slut: were you already this fucking wet when you were outside, staring up at the house, fantasizing about all the bad things I'd do to you? Or was it running through the shadows like my fucking *prey* that turned this greedy pussy into such a dripping mess?"

I groan as he jams his fingers into me again.

"So…"

Squelch.

"Fucking…"

Ram.

"*Wet* for me."

Suddenly, he pushes a third finger into me. I cry out, shuddering with pain and pleasure as he stretches me wide, pounding into my dripping pussy.

"That's it, princess," he snarls. "Make a fucking *mess* for me. Drip all over my hand and show me what a good little fuck-doll I've caught. Besides, baby," he murmurs, bending over me, his hand still gripping my hair and his three fingers sawing mercilessly in and out, "you've seen my cock." His lips nip sharply on my earlobe, making me squeal as my pussy clenches around his fingers.

“We both know you’ll need to be *nice and stretched out* to take me.”

I moan when I hear the jangle of his belt and the metallic sound of his zipper. I squirm and fight, not because I think I’d get away from him, or am even still trying to. But because the feel of his grip tightening on me, pinning me harder, and *taking this from me by force* has me aching for it.

“*Yes*, princess,” he groans. “Scream. Cry. Claw at me. It won’t change a fucking thing. I’m still going to shove my cock so deep inside you that you forget your own name.”

He pulls his fingers out of my pussy and roughly slaps the inside of my thigh. I cry out, then he does it again. I shudder when that same hand comes up in front of my face, and he rams his three sticky wet fingers right into my mouth.

“Fucking *fight me*,” he rasps. “Tell yourself that if you try to get away, it doesn’t count. But the thing is, princess…”

I shudder, moaning around his fingers in my mouth as I feel his fat, swollen cock head push against my needy pussy. He lines it up, rubbing it over my lips as they part around him.

“*We both know you asked for this*.”

The only reason he doesn't impale me on every thick inch of his cock with his first thrust is because I’m literally too tight to take it. I choke on the pain and the pleasure as he rams in roughly, sending my body, mind, and soul *reeling*.

He’s *so. Fucking. Big.*

It feels like he’s ripping me apart. Like I’m going to literally split in two around his huge fucking dick as he buries it inside me. It’s only when he slides back out, then a little deeper back in, that I realize I *didn’t* take it all on the first thrust.

“*Thaaaat’s it*, baby,” he groans, pulling back out. He sinks back in with a vicious thrust, cramming more of his fat cock into my tight, wet pussy. “*Stretch* for me, baby,” he snarls. “Let me stuff that little fuck hole with every inch of my big dick.”

I whine and moan, panting against the stairs as he grabs my hips, dragging his thick cock out before ramming it right back in, going a little deeper with every thrust. I’m so wet that it’s literally dripping down my thighs, but even so, he has to fight to work in every quarter of an inch.

“There we go, princess. Fuck, you’re taking it so well, like a good little slut. We’re almost there, baby girl. I’m going to get every goddamn inch of me stuffed into this tight little cunt if I have to tear you in half to do it.”

Jesus, I’m fucked up. Sick. Depraved. Because those words don’t turn me off. They don’t send me screaming.

They turn my blood to fire and my legs to jelly as I feel myself *drenching* his cock.

He withdraws once more, and then, with a feral growl, rams in…

All. The. Fucking. Way.

It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt. Nothing I’ve ever imagined a body *could* feel. The wind is knocked from my lungs. My eyes bulge, my mouth falls open against the stairs. He’s so deep that I'm surprised I don't feel him in my fucking throat.

“I *own* this pussy, princess,” he growls into my ear, his chest to my back, one hand on my hip, the other wrapping my ponytail around his fist. He rolls his hips, making me gasp breathlessly as I feel his huge dick swell and pulse inside me.

“And I’ll use it *when* I want, *how* I want, as *much* as I want. Is that clear?”

All I can do is whimper.

“*Answer me*.”

“*Y-yes!*” I choke.

My submission washes over me, taken by force. Slowly, I feel myself start to descend into a hazy, throbbing, dark place. It’s like my skin comes alive, and every nerve in my body is on fire. Every twitch of his cock, every pulse of every vein on his dick sends tremors rippling through my core.

“*Good girl*.”

Then, Nero starts to fuck me.

It's almost too much. Too deep. Too fast, too rough, too *everything*.

But it's in that madness and frenzied violence that I find exactly what I crave.

His muscles clench as he fucks me hard, brutally, scraping my knees against the steps as my fingers scrabble for purchase. He yanks up my top and roughly rips down my bra. I cry out, whimpering and sobbing with sick pleasure as my nipples drag across the wood, sending bolts of ecstatic pain rippling through my body.

His fist yanks my ponytail. His palm slaps my ass hard, then grips it tight as he thrusts into me with deep, punishing strokes. My mind melts and my body comes undone as he keeps up the frantic, vicious pace.

Suddenly, I'm breaking apart at the seams.

Fuck.

Oh fucking FUCK.

With a strangled cry, I feel myself coming hard for him, my pussy clenching and rippling, gripping his thick cock as he pounds into me.

"*There's* a good girl," he snarls. "Coming all over my fat fucking dick like a good little princess. Let me feel it drip down my fucking balls, baby."

The orgasm tears through me like a hurricane, taking with it the last of my strength. I cry out, whimpering and moaning as I collapse on the steps, limbs like spaghetti, body utterly spent. My cheek is against the stairs, my mouth slack.

Nero is nowhere near done with me, though. If anything, the way I just came undone and melted into a puddle only fuels him on, like lighter fluid on a fire.

His thrusts get harder, deeper, rougher. His hands are everywhere: mauling my breasts, pinching my nipples, wrapping around my throat, pulling my hair, slapping my ass. His grip there tightens. His thumb pushes between my cheeks.

Oh, fuck…

All I can do is whimper, drooling against the wood of the stairs as he sinks his thumb into my tight back hole and keeps fucking me like a rag doll.

The feeling is utterly consuming, like he's taking every part of my soul. The electric sensation of his thumb in my most private place sends rippling pulses through my core that have my entire reality spinning as I gasp for air.

"*Too... It's too much,*" I whine against the stairs, almost incoherent even to myself. Even as I say that, my body rebels against me, shattering and coiling and exploding in another orgasm.

Nero chuckles darkly, not slowing the frantic thrusts of his hips against my ass—his huge cock ripping me open and making places inside me I didn't even know I had ache for both more and mercy.

"Is it, princess?" he grunts, grabbing my hair in a fist.

"*Y—yes!*"

He starts to fuck his thumb in and out of my ass, sending my body into another shaky, gasping state.

"*Nero…please…*"

He reaches under me with his other hand, and when his fingers pinch my clit, it's like a wave crashing over me again.

I'm coming.

Fucking. *Again*.

"*Nero!*" I sob. "*It's too—*"

Another cry. Another shatter.

I need to stop fucking orgasming.

"If it really was too much, princess," he murmurs, grunting in drawn-out pleasure as he pushes into me again, "you'd stop

gripping my cock so eagerly, trying to keep me inside."

I sob as another wave ripples through me, sending me reeling as I kick at thin air and claw at the wood beneath me. I clench my knees together, but that just makes him feel even bigger inside me.

"*Please…!*"

Nero chuckles again. "You keep asking me to stop, princess, and yet your greedy pussy won't stop tightening around me. I think you and she need to have a sidebar and figure out what you really want. In the fucking meantime…"

I scream as he brutally rams into me, pushing his thumb deep alongside his cock as he yanks my ponytail.

"In. The. Fucking. *Mean. Time*…"

Every word is punctuated with a vicious thrust of his cock.

"I'm going to keep using this slutty hole until you can't walk for a *month*."

He rams into me once more. For a second, when he slides his bulging, fat cock out of my tender, swollen pussy, I think I'll find relief.

Not that it hurts. I mean, it *does*, in a delicious, aching way. It's just *too much*. Too much pleasure. Too much sensation. Too—I can't believe I'm thinking it—too many orgasms.

I gasp as he picks me up, a tangle of limbs and what little clothing is still attached to me, stands and stomps up the rest of the stairs.

For a second, I think maybe he's had his fill. That this death by pleasure is over.

Then he *throws me* down, and I hit a soft bed.

Lady Greymoor's bed.

Nero is on me in a millisecond, a wild beast pouncing. He grabs a fistful of my panties and yoga pants tangled around my knees and shoves my legs back, pushing my knees into my breasts, folding me in half.

My eyes lock on his frenzied, feral green gaze as he reaches through my ankles and slowly wraps his fingers around my throat.

Oh fuck…

His fat, swollen dick pushes into my battered pussy, making me wince and whine with black, twisted pleasure as he sinks all the way into me.

He starts pounding, fucking me hard and deep, his grip tightening on my throat.

My vision swims. Pleasure I've never imagined explodes in my core as I feel myself start to come *again*.

And again.

And again.

"*Stop."*

"Please."

It's not that I *want* him to stop.

It's that I *have* to stop orgasming, or I'm going to black the fuck out.

"I can't—"

"You *can*, princess," he snarls into my ear, crushing me as he bites the lobe. "And you fucking will. You'll take my cock like a good girl, and your slutty, greedy little pussy will keep coming all the fuck over it until *I say* we're done."

A wrenching sob of pleasure and abject submission whines from my throat.

"*Take it out…*"

“Then stop coming all over it.”

“*Please*—”

“Then you’ll need to stop strangling my cock like your hungry little pussy is *begging* for my cum, baby,” he snarls.

I moan pitifully when I feel him swell even *bigger* inside of me. His heavy balls slap my ass with every brutal thrust. His hand is still at my throat, cutting off my air. His other hand slides between my legs, pinching my swollen, aching clit.

The swelling, building sensation inside me feels like more than I can handle.

More than I can withstand.

More than my nervous system can endure.

His body is in a mad frenzy against me: muscles clenching, hands grabbing, nails scratching, breath panting. His teeth rake down my neck, and just as I feel myself start to detonate from the inside out, they latch firmly onto my throat.

Pain lances through me, mixed with the gut-wrenching, soul-shattering, mind-numbing sensation of my body coming apart at the seams, but it’s that bite that sends me over the edge.

Pain mixed with pleasure.

Damnation blended with rapture.

I’m only vaguely aware of the screaming, of my nails sinking into warm flesh and hard muscle. Of his cock pulsing violently inside me as his cum floods my insides. Of my walls clamping around him as my orgasm drags me down to hell.

I whimper, wincing slightly at the soreness between my legs as he slides out of me, his cock glistening with my cum and his, tinged pink with a little blood.

I slump against the bed, my body *wrecked*, my pulse hammering wildly in my ears as I collapse in on myself.

“Not yet, princess.”

He wraps my ponytail in his fist and moves up my bruised, battered body until his swollen, heavy cock is bobbing right in front of my face.

“Open that pretty mouth and show me how good girls clean up their messes.”

I freeze. He can’t be serious. His cock is still coated in our cum. Has my fucking *blood* on it.

Nero’s piercing green eyes lock with mine as he reaches down and slowly starts stroking his still very hard cock. His other hand tightens in my hair.

“*Open wide*,” he murmurs darkly.

God help me, I do.

My lips part. I moan quietly as he presses his sticky, wet cock between them. I can taste him—and me—as he glides over my tongue, into the back of my throat. He groans, slides out, then pumps back in.

Then he does it again. And again.

His cock thickens to iron, stretching my jaw as he starts to fuck my face with manic, brutal strokes. His hand slides down my body, and I whimper in both pain and ecstasy as he starts to rub my clit.

“That's it, princess,” he grunts. “Suck my cock clean like a good girl.”

He rams in again, and again, and *again*, until suddenly, I feel him groan as his abs tighten and his cock swells inside my mouth.

Holy shit. He’s coming. Again.

And so am I.

I can only groan and mumble and slobber around his cock as the final, punishing orgasm grabs me by the throat and shakes the life out of me. Nero grunts, and I feel his hot, sticky cum flood my mouth until it leaks out the corners of my lips.

He pulls out with another deep groan, stroking his bulging, twitching cock and splashing more cum over my lips and cheeks, and down my throat.

My eyes barely peel open. Instantly, they're met with a clash of violent green as he slowly, languidly, strokes himself. He reaches down, running one finger through the cum on my face and slowly pushing it into my mouth.

"You look so fucking pretty with my cum all over your face," he murmurs quietly, reverently.

Almost *sweetly*.

Then, without any warning, he lowers his face, eyes still locked on mine, and kisses me.

Slowly. Deeply. Not caring that his cum is still smeared across my lips as his tongue dances with mine.

This is madness.

Damnation.

And the *sweetest fucking oblivion*.

17

NERO

I FEEL LIKE A PREDATOR.

Not in a bad way. I tend to not view that word in the negative at all. I think it's used far too often to describe those who commit heinous acts of cowardice or evil. But they aren't actually *predators*. Just creeps. Monsters. Evil, shitty humans.

Real predators don't lurk in the shadows, trying to sneak photos of children. They don't lie to women to get them into their car, or exploit someone's misfortune.

Those are just wastes of space who, for all I care, can be rounded up and summarily shot. Good fucking riddance.

So, no. When I say I feel like a predator, I don't mean a lascivious monster preying on the innocent. I mean I feel like a *king*. Like an apex hunter of the jungle, enjoying the spoils of the hunt.

Because that is *exactly* what I'm doing.

I sit back against the headboard of the bed, one knee up, the other leg stretched languidly out. My eyes are glued with smug, cocky self-satisfaction on my prey, laid out before me.

Milena.

She's currently only semi-conscious, tangled in the sheets near my leg. Her yoga pants got tossed aside at some point, as did her bra. But her panties are still around one ankle, and her shirt's still shoved up over her tits.

She's still wearing her socks, too, which I find strangely adorable.

Her hair is a fucking *mess*. Her skin is flushed, mottled with red marks and *covered* in me, in every sense.

Bruises paint her skin like a crazy artist went to work on her with an oversized brush and cans of purple and blue, especially around her throat, breasts, and thighs. My cum is glistening as it dries on her neck and chest.

A streak of blood still mars her inner thigh.

A lazy, languid, satisfied grin pulls the corners of my mouth upward.

I reach over to the nightstand, open the drawer, and pull out a pack of cigarettes and my father's old copper Zippo—the one with the wolf face etched across it and the words "*Homo homini lupus est*" engraved below.

Man is a wolf to man.

Milena stirs slightly as I flick the flint, igniting the wick and bringing it to the cigarette between my lips. The tip glows orange as I take a slow drag, dropping the lighter back onto the side table and exhaling toward the ceiling.

This is the point where most people would talk. Check in. Debrief after all that insanity. Maybe whisper something soft and intimate, to make it feel romantic.

But I'm not most people, and this wasn't romance.

"I didn't know you smoked."

I take another slow drag, sliding my eyes down to meet hers. Even battered and bruised, with my fucking cum drying on her chin, she looks…

Beautiful.

A wrecked, claimed sort of beautiful.

One I don't want to look away from, which is confusing and decidedly out of character for me.

I don't use sex to connect with people. Quite the opposite. I use it to create distance. To put up stronger walls.

It's been like that ever since I was thirteen.

Since *her*.

Since she showed me things I was far too young to see.

I flinch, shaking my head.

"I don't," I growl quietly.

Milena arches a brow, smirking faintly as she eyes the evidence between my lips.

"Well…not *often*," I add with a slight grin.

"Just special occasions?" she teases, her voice still raspy.

"Something like that."

She winces as she rolls onto her stomach, a flash of pain making her jaw clench a little as she props herself up on her elbows.

"Same," she says. "Just here and there." Her eyes drop to the smoke in my mouth. "Could I…"

I nod. Without even thinking about it, I take one more drag, pluck the cigarette from my lips, then pass it to her.

Her fingers brush mine as she takes the smoke and lifts it up. I watch, more mesmerized than I should be as her soft, swollen lips wrap around it, another wince rippling over her face as she draws in a breath, making the tip glow.

It feels weirdly intimate to see her wrap her lips around the same place where mine just were.

As if everything we just did—the chase, fucking her raw, filling her with my cum, spilling it all over her face and then kissing it off, wasn't "intimate" enough.

It doesn't make sense, but I can't shake that idea as I watch her take another slow drag before passing the cigarette back to me.

"Thanks."

I nod, unable to look away as she rests her cheek on her folded forearms.

"So… How do you have the code to this house and free rein of it?"

"Probably because it's *my* house."

Her head lifts—maybe a bit too quickly. She winces again. Her gaze holds mine.

"Wait, seriously?"

I nod. "Bought it a few years ago."

Her brows knit. "*Why*?"

I shrug and look away. It's easier and simpler than saying something like "haunted mansions are cool", or "because I used to walk past 'the old Greymoor place' and always thought it was beautiful".

Or "one day, I'd like to restore this place to its former glory and call it home, as opposed to the mausoleum I currently share with the ghosts of my past".

"Like, what do you use it for?"

I glance at her. "Various things."

The second I say it, I see a flicker of cold viciousness in her eyes that she quickly tries to cover with a forced, brittle smile.

She reaches for my cigarette again, and once more her fingers brush mine as she takes it. But this time she looks away from me as she takes a soft drag.

"Various things like bringing girls here to chase, catch, and fuck?"

The words drop emotionlessly from her lips, like she's ordering a sandwich.

Purposefully cold. Deliberately blunt.

"Not typically, no."

Her brows furrow when she finally looks at me again.

"No," I repeat, reaching out and plucking the cigarette from her fingers. I take a slow drag, eyes still locked on her as I exhale toward the ceiling. "*Jealous*, princess?"

Her lips tighten. "*No*," she says abruptly. "I just don't believe you."

I chuckle, passing the cigarette back to her. "And why is that?"

"I just don't."

I smirk. "*Why*."

"Because you're…*you*."

I grin wider. "And what about *me* makes me so untrustworthy."

She grins impishly. "You strike me as a troublemaker," she giggles. "That's all."

It's like an icy blade slicing into my brain.

Everything goes cold. Everything shuts down, going as black as charred bones.

You're such a troublemaker, baby boy.

My blood slows to syrup in my veins, my pulse a distant *POUND POUND POUND* somewhere inside me.

You want to come over and cause some more trouble?

"No," I growl. "I'm not."

Milena arches a brow, her grin widening. Totally missing my cues.

"Not a troublemaker?" She grins lazily at me. "Bullshit. You—"

"I'm fucking *not*."

The words spit from my mouth like vicious curses, shattering the mood entirely. Milena's head jerks up, her eyes wide and her mouth open in shock.

I don't focus on that. I don't focus on anything but the roaring in my head as I suddenly slide off the bed and stand up. I stab the cigarette out in a crystal ashtray on the nightstand and storm from the room.

My clothes are still on the landing outside. I dress quickly, yanking them on before plucking up the bits of hers that were discarded out here, too.

I stride back into the bedroom, ignoring the stunned look on her face as I toss her clothes onto the foot of the bed and finish buttoning up my shirt.

Milena stares at me, her face pale, her brows furrowed in confusion.

"Um… Did I say something wrong?"

"Nope," I grunt coldly. "We're just done here."

"*Oh*," she says quietly.

I want to focus on that. Want to dial this whole fucking thing back three minutes, to that strange sense of peace I felt before the ghosts of the past reared up to tear me apart.

Too late now.

“You know where the door is,” I growl.

I chance a look back at her, my jaw tightening at the way she’s staring at me.

Confused. Concerned, maybe. Probably pissed.

But I don’t have the bandwidth to address that right now.

So I don’t say a word before I turn, march out of the room, and leave her there.

…Before I drag her down into my madness.

18

MILENA

I KEEP TELLING myself I should be relieved.

That I dodged a bullet. Got out before I was crushed or scarred by something over which I have no control.

Instead, I feel hollow.

My arm jerks as the zipper of my dance bag sticks. I scowl at it, the empty sensation gnawing at my stomach before I yank it again. This time it opens loudly, the ripping sound echoing in the empty locker room.

People will start arriving for rehearsal any minute now. But I've been here for an hour and a half, using the treadmill in the weight room in the basement. I love to run, but these days, Papa insists that at least two of his men shadow me. And having two giant, gruff, unsmiling guys dogging your every step through Central Park is *not* as motivating as you might think.

So, sometimes I come here early to pound the imaginary pavement. Madame Kuzmina knows, and gave me the code to the side door a few months ago.

I peel off my sweaty running clothes and pad over to the showers, letting the water get hot before I step under the spray. I groan as it massages my aching muscles. Wince as it streams over my bruises and aches from the madness of Greymoor two days ago.

Nero's been MIA ever since.

I refuse to believe it's because I called him a "troublemaker": it would be insane for anyone over the age of six to get even a little mad about that, let alone pissed enough to shut me out, turn ice cold and disappear.

But I said *something* that flipped him from rational, if not totally normal, *pillow-talk* Nero, into a solid black brick wall where communication goes to die.

One second, we were existing in this serene moment after the insanity of what we just did. The next, he was—gone.

And I don't know why it hurts. I don't know why I'm not *happy* about this.

He's not my boyfriend. "We" are not a "we" in any way, shape or form. We just have a mutual affinity for supremely fucked-up sex games.

If anything, being or having *that* with Nero should terrify me. His bottomless ability to go darker, deeper, and more feral should be a huge line of red flags.

Avalanche of orgasms aside, I should feel *relieved* to be out of his crosshairs.

So why do I keep checking my phone like an idiot teenager, worried I've missed a text from him?

I wince again as the water hits a certain spot, glancing down at the marks covering my body.

I mean, Jesus Christ. I look like an abuse victim.

The door to the locker room bangs open, making me jump.

Nero.

I cringe the second the thought hits my brain, hating that it's the first thing that came to mind when the door opened.

But it isn't. Nero, that is.

“What up, lady? You're here early.”

I glance over my shoulder to see Brooklyn walking into the changing room. She slings her heavy dance bag off her shoulder with a groan.

I nod, ducking my head back under the spray. “Yeah, I went for a run downstairs.”

“You do realize you live *on* Central Park, right?”

I roll my eyes, glancing back at her as she peels her top off. Both of us tense for a second, our eyes taking in each other’s bruised bodies.

The tension hangs in the air, just the sound of the shower filling the void.

“Brook—”

“I won’t ask if you don’t,” she says quietly.

I scowl. “Fuck that. I *know* how I got these, and it’s nothing criminal.” My eyes angrily take in the black marks on her ribs. “Brooklyn, who the fuck—”

“Can we drop this?” she murmurs, her eyes begging me. “*Please*?”

“No, Brooklyn. I’m not seeing that and not—”

The door bangs open again. This time, it’s Val who strolls in, dance bag slung over one muscled shoulder.

“Dude, c'mon!” Brooklyn snaps, whirling away and yanking a towel around herself.

I roll my eyes, turning to finish rinsing myself off before I crank off the shower and grab a towel, too.

“What?” Val frowns, dropping his bag with an utterly disinterested look on his face. “I've seen your tits a million fucking times by now, both of you.”

“Yeah, well, there *is* a men’s dressing room, jackass,” I sigh, tightening my towel around my body and walking to my locker. “Which, by the by, I thought you were exclusively using these days?”

It’s never been weird up till now that Val sometimes uses our changing room. But in the last few months, we’ve all decided without actually saying so that he should stop, because it clearly makes Dove, one of our newer dancers, uncomfortable. Not uncomfortable enough for her to say anything, but it’s pretty clear to the rest of the girls in the company, and that's fair.

Of course, there’s a hundred different theories about her reasons, which are sometimes tied to one of the *thousand* different rumors about her background. It’s common knowledge that her father is Cesare Marchetti, head of the Marchetti Italian mafia family, but what's *not* known is why she’s been MIA from New York for a few years.

Psych ward in France. Rehab facility in Switzerland. I’m honestly surprised I haven’t heard “empress of Mars” floated.

“Seriously,” Brooklyn mutters, dropping her towel and ignoring Val as she tugs on her tights. “Go play in boy-land.”

Val’s brow furrows as he rakes his fingers through his dark hair. “Yeah, well…” he frowns. “Trouble in paradise right now. I’ll be disrobing here, if that’s all right. Don’t worry,” he grunts, peeling off his shirt. “I’ll be gone before the international woman of mystery gets here.”

I glance at Brooklyn, who glances back at me. Then we both turn to Val.

“What’d you do?”

He rolls his eyes, turning away and dropping his jeans before reaching for his tights.

“You know the phrase ‘fuck around and find out’?”

I snort. “This’ll be good. Who’d you fuck?”

“Étienne’s girlfriend.”

Brooklyn makes a face, but Val quickly holds up a finger.

"For *context*, before Miss Judgement over here climbs down my fucking throat, I was *invited* to do so. They wanted to spice shit up and bring in another dude…" He shrugs. "My reputation—"

"Precedes itself, by about a mile," I interject.

Val bows dramatically. "Precisely," he grins.

"So…?" Brooklyn prods. "If you were invited to join them, how'd you fuck it up with our illustrious guest artist?"

Étienne normally dances with the Paris Opera Ballet. But he's guesting here for two months.

"First of all," Val grunts, raising a middle finger. "Fuck you very much."

"Just tell us what happened," I sigh, rolling my eyes.

"Fine," Val mutters. "Étienne's straight, so it was just meant to be about her. But…" He arches his brows as he pulls on his top. "Apparently Simone doesn't moan like that with *him*…"

Brooklyn grins. "Oh, *shit*."

"Dude, tell me about it," Val sighs. "Plus, I mean, size-wise, it was real awkward when I took off my—"

"Ah-dat-dat-dat-dat," Brooklyn cuts in, shaking her head and a finger as she pulls her leotard up. "Nope. TM-fucking-*I*, my dude."

"So this is why you're not welcome for the time being in the men's room," I sigh.

Val nods. "Exactly. He fucked around and found out his girlfriend actually *comes* with another dude. Not my problem, though."

"No, just ours," I smile sweetly at him as we all finish up and head for the door.

Brooklyn holds me back for a second.

"Hey," she says quietly after Val is out of earshot. "Look, what you saw…"

My face twists. "James?" I ask quietly.

She gives me a pleading look. "It's *done,* okay? For real, it's not a thing anymore. I swear, I'm okay." Her brow quirks up. "Okay, now it's your turn."

I make a face. "Pass."

"Fuck that. What happened?"

Oh, I got chased by a maniac through a haunted mansion, got the shit railed out of me, and came literally more times than I can count. No big deal.

The instant I think that, other thoughts and emotions filter into me.

The emptiness. The confusion about *why* I feel empty.

"Nothing."

She groans, rolling her eyes. "Well, it *looks* like you got fucked by a biker gang."

I snort. "Nah, only half of one."

She grins. "Asshole."

"You bitches coming?"

"Yeah, *do not* call me that," Brooklyn snaps as we walk over to where Val is waiting by the door.

"I've always admired the British for keeping *cunt* alive and well," he shrugs, grinning as he opens the door.

"You call me a cunt," Brooklyn says sweetly, "and I will cut off your dick and fuck you in the ass with it—"

Every molecule of air seems to be sucked out of the world as we step out of the dressing room and almost directly *into* Kir

Nikolayev.

I stumble to a stop. Miracle of miracles, *Val* himself seems to be at a loss for words. Brooklyn, who's almost walked right into Kir's chest, gapes up at him with a horrified expression on her shocked face.

"*Fuck*…" she croaks.

It's not *that* weird to see him here. When he's not ruling half of New York as one of the most undisputedly powerful Bratva leaders in the city, Kir occasionally does drop by the Mercury Theater to check in.

I mean, he *does* own the building, and is the chief financier of the company itself.

He's also *disturbingly* gorgeous. Dark hair, haunting dark eyes, and the jawline of an Armani model, which he also happens to dress like, too.

All of us freeze as his dark eyes sweep over us, then land squarely on poor Brooklyn, who's looking up at him like she just got busted in the middle of a murder.

"That's…quite a descriptive threat, Ms. Ellis."

It's wild: you can literally *see* her face change colors in real-time. Pale to the point of blue, then white, then a sudden dash of pink that explodes into crimson.

"I…thought so," she mumbles.

Kir's brow arches. "I'll have to use it someday." His steely gaze shifts to Val. "Mr. Bancroft," he growls, his voice quiet but somehow carrying *insane* power. "May I ask what earned you such a threat?"

Val clears his throat. "I'm guessing the part where I threatened to call her a cunt?"

A shadow flickers in Kir's dark eyes.

"That would do it," he grunts. "I suggest based on her threat that you…don't."

"Heard loud and clear, sir," Val nods.

Just then, Madame Kuzmina floats up the hallway, rings glittering on her fingers as her dark eyes sweep over us accusingly.

"I'm quite sure the three of you should be in Conditioning Class by now," she says coldly. "*Not* bothering Mr. Nikolayev."

She's a holy terror when she wants to be, but I have a soft spot for Madame Kuzmina. Maybe it's our shared Russian heritage, or the fact that she looks like some sort of wild-ass fortune teller.

It's also funny that we all think of her as being so much older, because of the way she rules the company with an iron fist, wrapped up in her dark, shapeless shawls. Up close, though, you realize that she's probably only thirty-five or something.

Still supremely terrifying, though.

"*Now*, my dears," she breathes with malice.

Kir gives us all another piercing look and deft nod of his exquisitely perfect jawline, then he and Madame Kuzmina turn and walk off down the hallway.

I shiver, but not because of Kir's genetics. Because of a scene I've still got playing on repeat in my head.

A scene in the shadows outside Greymoor, where Nero and Kir were talking quietly…right before Nero cut two men's throats.

"Every tribe needs a ghost story. Every club needs a boogeyman. I can be that for you."

Why the *fuck* were Nero and Kir killing two men that night? Why and how do they even talk at all?

My brain replays the spine-chilling glint in Nero's eyes that night, right before he spilled blood. It's not *that* different from a look I've seen directed at *me*.

…Right before he was about to chase me. Or right before he fucked me. A look like the eerie calmness of a shoreline right before the hurricane slams in with a thunderclap.

And suddenly, the emptiness is back.

The confusion and hurt I don't even want to acknowledge.

"Hey, Milena…"

I blink, yanking my gaze to Brooklyn. "Huh?"

"You know how I ask you how to say things in Russian all the time?"

I arch a brow. "Yeah?"

"How do you say *big dick energy*?"

I roll my eyes as Brooklyn and Val crack up.

"I legit almost said loud and *KIR* instead of loud and clear," Val groans. "What the *fuck*."

"He's *so* fucking hot," Brooklyn sighs. "Like, insanely, ridiculously, illegally—"

"And also the notoriously vicious leader of a giant criminal organization?" I smile pointedly at Brooklyn. "Shouldn't our fantasies maybe switch to *non*-violent men? Like, guys who paint, and grow flowers, maybe raise ducks?"

Val frowns. "Uh, that doesn't sound *nearly* as fucking hot as a Bratva Crime Boss?"

"*Pakhan*," I toss back. "The Russian is *Pakhan*."

"Well, that motherfucker is definitely *Pakhan*."

I roll my eyes as Brooklyn snorts and cracks the fuck up. "Oh, for sure."

"You guys are gross," I groan. "Let's get to conditioning."

"Do you think the word *juicy* would be appropriate for his dick?" Val ponders, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Absolutely," Brooklyn giggles.

I leave the two of them rhapsodizing over Kir's dick as I head off to rehearsal.

Still feeling the weird, confusing, empty ache inside.

And still imagining those green eyes glinting in the darkness.

19

NERO

"It's good to see you, *birichino*."

I chuckle as I hug Aldo and clap his back, letting the goofy-ass nickname he had for me when I was six roll over me.

I mean, it's *Aldo*.

Aldo and my father were friends even back when my grandfather was running the family, and Aldo's dad Bruno was Grandpa's *consigliere*. When my father, Antonio, took over, Bruno's son Aldo become *his consigliere*.

Aldo never had children, though. Never even got married.

Dom, being one of my best and oldest friends—albeit one who *doesn't* share my part-time affinity for adjudicating and sentencing the accused in a clandestine secret society—was obviously chosen by me to be my *consigliere*. But I still call Aldo in when I can't think through a problem or need some advice that only comes with decades of experience in this game.

Aldo pulls away from me and smiles as he embraces Dom, patting his back as well. We all move into my office, Aldo and Dom taking seats on the couches as I move to the bar cart.

"Drink, Aldo?"

"*Sí, grazie*," he nods. "Fernet, please."

"Dom?"

My *consigliere* makes a face. "Literally anything *but* Fernet, thanks."

Hey, not everyone's a fan of something that tastes like cooking herbs and Jägermeister served out of an asshole. But unlike Dom, I happen to share Aldo's affinity for the admittedly *foul*-tasting Italian aperitif.

I grin as I pour Dom a whiskey and then grab the Fernet bottle for Aldo and me.

"*Salute*," I say as the three of us raise our glasses. Then I settle in on the couch across from the two of them.

"So," Aldo nods. "Leo Debolsky."

Dominic glowers as I exhale slowly.

"Immediate thoughts?" I ask.

Aldo's nose wrinkles. "He's a prick and a drunk. With no class whatsoever," he mutters.

Dom spreads his arms. "Exactly."

"To be fair," I say, "he's apparently no longer a drunk. He's sober these days."

Aldo lifts a shoulder and grunts. "Still a classless prick. *However*…" He clears his throat. "The Debolsky Bratva *is* on the rise—considerably so over the last few years. Vladimir cashed in some favors and bought himself a seat on the Aviation Council in Moscow, which basically means he gets the privilege of policing *himself* in terms of exports." Aldo snorts. "As you might imagine, this has made him an extremely wealthy and powerful man quite quickly."

I nod, my brows furrowed. I don't have any interest in marrying my fucking sister off like a bargaining chip. We don't live in the eleventh fucking century. But I *do* want Aldo's take on this, because it could be that the Debolsky family wants to figure out

a way to do business with us that does *not* include my sister having to learn how to speak Russian.

Aldo eyes me as he takes a slow sip of his Fernet. “You’re not really looking to marry Gabriella off.”

It’s a statement, not a question.

I shrug. “Would my father have?”

He chuckles deeply. “If Vladimir Debolsky had come to him with the power, influence, and money he has now?” He grins. “Maybe?”

Dominic scowls, slugging back the rest of his drink at once. “Nero’s not doing that.”

“Why don’t we let the king speak for himself, Mr. Caruso,” Aldo says quietly. “Maybe he *does* have his mind made up. I will say, though, a partnership with the Debolsky Bratva would be *extremely* advantageous to this family. There’s even talk of Vladimir making a play for a seat on the Bratva High Council. I don’t have to tell you that is no small thing.”

He’s not wrong.

Various criminal organizations have a way of putting together their own pseudo-legislative bodies to keep the peace between the biggest fish, and guarantee that a rising tide lifts all ships. The Irish have their Council of Clans. Us Italians have The Commission, which I sit on with the Barone, Amato, Scaliami, and Marchetti families.

The Russians have *two* groups, because they’re fucking Russian and of course they do. There’s the Iron Table, which includes Kir with the Nikolayev Bratva, Yelizaveta Solovyova running the Solovyova Bratva, Roman’s father helming the Nikitin Bratva, Bane’s father at the head of the Antonov Bratva, and Drazen Krylov. There’s also the Bratva High Council, which includes Mikhail’s aunt Anastasia leading the Javanović Bratva, along with the Kashenko, Volkov, and Tsarenko Bratva families.

…And the Kalishniks.

My thoughts are suddenly far, *far* away from Leo’s absurd proposal to marry my sister.

And squarely on *her*.

Milena.

An angry, sharp feeling surges inside me. Not directed at her, or the completely innocuous word she said that set me right the fuck off the other day.

No. It's because she’s not *with me* right now.

It’s not the first time I’ve felt it. It’s been creeping in there ever since that first night when she walked into Greymoor not having a *clue* what was waiting for her.

The annoying reality is, I *like* Milena being around.

A lot.

I like the way her presence makes my blood roar a little louder. The way her scent curls in my senses, hair, and skin and just fucking *stays* there, haunting me.

The flicker in her eyes that takes me far, far away from the pain, the darkness, and the demons prowling inside me.

I like *talking* to her, and I don’t really like talking to most people. That says a lot.

And yet, I walked away the other day. I didn’t look back, didn’t call, didn’t text.

…Mostly because I’m a fucking idiot with issues.

That’s the annoying part: I can sit here stewing and moping as if she’s the one who left *me* in that bedroom all I like, but it was me who walked away from her.

I scowl into my Fernet, tuning Aldo and Dom completely out as they start to bicker about what would actually happen if Gabby were to marry Leo.

I walked away from her.

A lot of that—okay, most of that—is because of my fucking issues with intimacy. With sex, specifically. It's why I chase, but release as soon as I catch. Why I humor the girls at the Black Court when they giggle and ask me to show them what's inside the labyrinth.

Surprise! It's *me* and my trailer full of hangups.

Sex is a line I don't cross, though. I don't think anyone realizes that, not even those closest to me in the Court.

I haven't allowed myself to go there—sex, that is—in quite a while. Not since *that* night.

And then Milena happened.

When she slipped into my world it pushed away the confusion, at least for a while. Until she called me "troublemaker".

She couldn't possibly know that word had such razor-sharp edges for me. But hearing it, taken together with the sex and the tangled bodies and limbs, shook something loose inside me that I've worked *very* hard to keep locked down for years.

Hence, my fucking walk-out.

"No, you listen to *me*, Aldo," Dom snarls, standing abruptly. "I'll humor your fucking hypotheticals *to a fucking point.* But there *isn't* a reality where Gabriella gets married off to that fuck-head—"

"We get the idea, Dom," I growl quietly, raising a hand.

He glares once more at Aldo, then exhales.

"Sorry," he mutters. "I got…"

"*Passionate*," Aldo nods with a smile. He reaches over and pats Dom on the shoulder. "We are on the same page, my friend, and the same *team*."

Dom nods, still looking pissed.

Passionate indeed.

"I think we're done here for today," I grunt, glancing at the time. Honestly, all of this was just to get Aldo's take on the situation.

But also, I have someplace to be.

And if *it* doesn't clear my head?

I'm *fucked*.

* * *

"GUILTY."

The finality of The Stag's tone seals the fate that Tony DiCorzo honestly already had when he walked in here tonight.

Changing your name and moving to Europe might seem like a good idea if you're Tony and trying to weasel out of a blood marker you signed eighteen years ago.

But when your grand escape plan involves *moving in with your fucking cousin in Piedmont*, where everyone back here fucking *knows* your family is from?

That's just lazy.

And tonight, Tony's going to pay for that laziness with his life.

I know that some people view the Black Court as pure vigilante anarchy. That we're a bunch of bloodthirsty psychos running around in masks in an underground cathedral doling out sentences and executions like the Spanish Inquisition on acid.

But the truth is, the underworld *needs* us.

The criminal world we all exist has few rules, but nature. But there are ones that will not and cannot be broken. Blood markers are one of those rules.

Two parties, one promise, signed in literal blood. You don't break one of those. You don't joke about breaking one of those.

Because without it, and without the basic foundation these simple rules of our world create, the whole thing devolves into actual anarchy.

You're fucking welcome, criminals of the world.

The Raven rolls his neck as he rises from his seat next to me and descends from the dais. He stands in front of a stricken-looking Tony and tips his head to the side.

"Fight, or flight."

The whole cathedral space falls silent. Like the onlookers are holding their collective breath, waiting to hear what's next.

The Raven points to the table laden with axes, knives, swords, clubs, brass knuckles and more.

"You can fight," he murmurs, "Or…" He turns and gestures at the stone arch leading into the labyrinth. "You can take flight. What's it going to be, Tony?"

Tony turns and eyes the table of goodies with a hollow, pale face.

Swear to fuck, if another fucking Barone brother gets to use those dueling pistols before I do—

"Flight."

Interesting. I didn't see that coming.

Tony's a brawler type, a tough guy, and he's got a brawler's physique: shorter, wider, a bit barrel-chested.

Not *exactly* the long legs of a runner, if you know what I mean.

The Raven exhales like he's annoyed. "Just pick fucking fight, asshole."

Tony trembles. "Y-you said I had a choice!"

"I mean, *you do*," Nico sighs. "I just don't fucking feel like running tonight." He exhales heavily and swivels to me. "Wolf, help me out here."

My pulse quickens.

Excellent.

Nico and I trade places. He returns to his seat as I walk down to the main floor. I step closer to Tony, eyeing him through my mask.

"Last chance," I mutter.

"*Flight*," he blurts. "I choose flight."

I frown. "Did you *notice* the dueling pistols?"

"Wolf," The Bull grunts. "He's made his choice."

Blue-balling little fucker.

I escort Tony over to the archway. I give him the usual rundown: it's a labyrinth, you get a head start, maybe you'll get out, blah blah fucking blah.

He won't. Get out, that is.

He takes off, his panicky, frantic breathing almost louder than his footsteps. I give him a minute, then dive in after him, my senses tuning. My skin tingling.

Every nerve jangling with the hunger I've never been able to control.

The thrill of the fucking *hunt*.

Gradually my pace slows, though, until I'm at a dead stop in the middle of the maze, glaring at a wall.

The thrill isn't as good.

Not without *her*.

It feels cheap by comparison. A shitty imitation.

I don't hunger for this hunt like I do when it's Milena. I don't feel the same hounding sensation at my heels, spurring me on.

I exhale and run my hand through my hair.

I need to figure my shit out. I need to go to her. I need to—

"I—I think I see the way out!"

I'm ripped back to reality when I hear Tony's voice.

"I-it's real!!"

Fuck.

It's not bullshit. When they're given the option to run, we hint that they might survive the labyrinth, that there might be a way out. *There really is one*.

By the sounds of it, this motherfucker is closer to it than anyone has ever been allowed to get.

Can't have that.

I take off at a dead run, bolting down corridors and rounding corners so hard I slam into the wall.

Tony may be near the exit, but I know this fucking maze like the back of my hand. Roughly eleven seconds after the moron called out, letting me know exactly where he was, I round another corner and smash into him from the side.

He grunts as he hits the wall next to him so hard that blood splatters the stone. He wheezes and whimpers, dropping to his knees and holding his cracked skull.

"I—I'm so close...please…"

"Not close enough."

My knife cuts cleanly through his jugular, spilling a river of blood onto the stone floor. He jerks, gurgles briefly, then falls face down into it and goes still.

I glance up and frown.

Shit, he really *was* close.

Too close.

I'm losing my edge, and I know damn well why.

20

MILENA

THEY SAY idle hands are the devil's workshop.

I mean, *I* don't. But "they" do.

In my case, the idle hands come from a distinct lack of *Nero* in my life over the last 60-odd hours. And they're taking over, and making me do insane things.

…Like clean up my bedroom.

It's not a disaster area or anything. But it was already overdue for a refresh when I moved out a few years ago, and ever since I've moved *back*, I haven't done squat to it. So tonight, my idle hands are hard at work.

Switching around framed photos on the wall. Moving my monstera plant from one corner to the other. Switching up the arrangement of my super cozy reading nook. I even managed to grunt and strain my way through shifting my bed a little closer to the windows, because why not.

I finally turn to my massive bookshelves, eying them warily. Organizing my books is definitely a project I've been putting off.

No time like the present. I step closer, my lip catching in my teeth as my gaze lands on one of the *several* copies of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* on the shelves. My mind drifts to that scene in the bookstore.

Laz.

I frown as I turn away from the shelves. I grab my phone from my desk and flop face-down on my bed as I unlock it and open Instagram.

What are you doing, weirdo.

A *large* section of my brain has been completely stuck on Nero for the last few days: his mannerisms. The predatory way he walks and prowls, the feral feeling I get with him. His eyes, glinting green. His touch, his scent, the taste of his lips. The thrill of his footsteps rushing through the dark, right behind me.

But now, the small piece of my brain that *isn't* preoccupied with Nero switches to another face.

I push down the bizarre feelings of guilt…what are *those* about…as I tap on Laz's profile and start scrolling his posts.

At first glance, it's the social media account of any young, good-looking mafia heir. Pictures of him next to exotic sports cars or holding a glass of champagne. On vacation. At clubs. Many photos taken at Doomsday, which he partially owns. Lots—*lots*—of him posing with or surrounded by gorgeous women.

I roll my eyes.

Then, I start to notice other posts, sprinkled between the rest. These ones have way fewer likes or comments.

They catch *my* attention, though.

Shots of vintage bookstores. Of first edition books. Reposts of interesting *New Yorker* articles and essays. Even some photos of Earnest Hemingway's grave, which it appears Laz specifically traveled to Ketchum, Idaho to see.

I pause, frowning.

For the second time, I'm considering there's a whole other side to him I never knew about.

I scroll back up and tap on a slideshow from when Laz visited Ibiza a few months ago. Shots of him shirtless on the beach—tanned, shredded, tattooed.

Charming, perfect smile. Slightly tousled dark hair. Piercing green eyes.

I lick my lips as my pulse beats erratically.

What *if*?

What if my pen pal from all those years ago wasn't Nero? And what if that first time—*my* first time—was with *Laz*?

I roll onto my back and drop the phone next to me, shivering. A strange sensation slithers through me, and I hug myself to try to shake it away.

My phone dings next to my head, startling me. I reach for it and hold it over my face before I blink and sit up when see who's just texted me.

NERO

It's been suggested…mostly by me…that I may be a bit of a fucking mess at times. Not the fun kind, either.

Heat throbs in my chest. My cheeks warm as my lips pull to a grin.

NERO

I shouldn't have walked out like that.

It's not an apology. But I think it's the closest I'm going to get from him.

I swallow, biting my lip before starting to type with my thumbs.

ME

No, you shouldn't.

ME

I had to call some other randos to come over and finish the job. They were okay, I guess. Not great, but decent fucks.

I'm *obviously* teasing. But the second I send it, I'm worried if he'll realize that. I'm typing "that was a joke" when my phone dings.

NERO

Hey, don't blame them. Can you imagine having to follow ME?

I roll my eyes, giggling at my phone.

NERO

It's not exactly a fair contest. Imagine having Elvis open for you. You'd be fucked.

ME

Right?

NERO

Decent dicks, though?

I snort out a laugh. This is…weird. But fun. And suddenly, I'm in the best mood I've been in for days.

ME

I've had better.

NERO

I know.

My cheeks heat as I grin at the screen.

NERO

Speaking of dicks, mine is missing you. Come to Greymoor.

No joke: I'm wet *instantly*.

But it's also almost midnight, and I've got an early day tomorrow.

ME

It's really late? I have to dance at like 9.

There's no reply. Instantly, my mood sinks. I'm super close to typing "just kidding, I'm on my way" when I stop myself.

What the fuck, self.

A, *he's* the one who left *me* at Greymoor and then went completely radio silent for days. And B, dropping everything and rushing over because he demanded it is fucking pathetic.

I stare at our text exchange. Still no reply. Not even hovering dots.

I purse my lips.

I *will not* change my answer.

Finally, my phone dings again.

NERO

Well?

ME

Well what?

NERO

Have you decided if you're still too mad at me to come all over my cock like a good girl?

My entire body tingles as my face flushes.

ME

Oh, was I not clear before? I'm going to bed. Some of us have to work tomorrow.

I grin as I keep typing.

ME

Besides, the two guys from the other night after you took off are coming over to double-team me.

The response is instant.

NERO

You already used your one joke.

ME

Who says I'm joking?

NERO

Careful, princess. I don't share what's mine.

Fuck.

Vicious, hot need throbs deep inside me, snaking through every vein until I'm trembling.

ME

To be completely clear, what exactly are you calling "yours" right now?

NERO

Look in a mirror.

NERO

While you're at it, take off your clothes and send me a picture of your perfect tits and pretty pussy.

My jaw drops.

I have never "sexted" with *anyone*. It makes the filthiness of what he's saying even more thrilling, somehow.

More exciting.

ME

lol NOPE

NERO

I've already apologized for the other night. I have…issues.

ME

You think? And I didn't actually see the word "sorry".

NERO

Use your imagination.

I find myself giggling.

ME

I can't. I already told you, I've got those guys coming over :P

I grin as I keep typing.

ME

Seriously, I really do have to go to bed. Thanks for texting.

ME

Night!

NERO

Lock your windows, princess.

NERO

You never know when the big bad wolf might come calling.

I'm grinning like a fool as I start to type "When am I seeing you again?"

Then I frown.

Too much.

Way too much.

I erase it.

ME

lol. I'll keep an eye out.

I drop the phone onto my bed, then go wash up in the bathroom. I brush my teeth and my hair, and change into some loose shorts and a tank top.

Sleep doesn't come easily. My mind is too full of chasing, hunting, grunting growls. Of outstretched hands and punishing smacks. Of shredding, feasting lips and teeth, and the madness that he brings out in me.

At some point, I'm aware of consciousness barely returning to me. It's still dark out, and the house is quiet. For a second, I'm confused why I'm awake.

A soft moan tumbles from my lips as consciousness begins to filter in a little more, and I gradually become aware of a heavy weight on the bed.

And of the fact that my shorts are gone.

Suddenly, I'm *very* aware of the fact that Nero is lying between my spread, naked legs, his tongue wrapped around my swollen clit and his green eyes piercing into mine.

"I warned you to lock your windows, *princess*."

.

I wasn't expecting you to actually answer that.

And I sure as hell wasn't expecting that answer.

But if you think I'd ever judge you for it, you don't know me at all. And I think we both know you do.

I have a confession to make: I didn't randomly drive our conversation in that direction. You've said things in the past—used certain phrases, hinted at certain thoughts or wants—that made me wonder, so I pushed us there on purpose.

I wanted to know if your head and your desires went to the same dark, fucked-up places mine does.

Again, no judgement. And spoiler: they do.

My tastes tend to be...polarizing. Mostly shunned. It's not that I'm a monster, it's just that I have the urge to do what most people would view as monstrous things.

To chase. To tie up. To take away all power and control.

Non-consent of the consensual variety, I guess you could say.

So no, I don't think your kink is "fucked up." I think it's honest.

Shame we don't know each other outside of these notes, isn't it?

Be heard,

-Me

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NERO

SHE DOESN'T HAVE MANY. But one of Milena's few flaws is that she still takes some of the things I say to her as hyperbole. Worse, a joke.

She *really* should know better by now.

I strip in the darkness of her bedroom, listening to her slow, quiet breathing as my cock swells, until it's so fucking hard that it curves up toward the ceiling, precum leaking from the pulsing head and tip to run down my shaft.

A wolf hunts, and when prey taunts that wolf, the inevitable only becomes more…

Personal.

Necessary.

When am I seeing you again?

I watched in real time as she typed those words and then quickly deleted them. How? Simple. Two nights ago, I was *also* in her bedroom while she slept, slowly and languidly rubbing her clit until she came in her sleep.

She must have missed the streaks of cum I left dripping down her pussy and between her legs when she woke up in the morning. Maybe she was still groggy when she jumped in the shower, who knows.

Either way, as well as making her greedy little cunt come all over my fingers, I used her face to open her phone and installed a hidden screen mirroring app while I was there.

No, I don't feel guilty about that in the slightest.

But that's partly why I'm here, dick hard, pulse pounding in my ears, eyes piercing the dimness of the room as I slowly prowl toward her sleeping body.

She asked.

This is her answer.

She barely shifts when I pull the covers back, and murmurs quietly as I slip my fingers into the waist of her cotton shorts to peel them down. I slip a hand underneath her firm ass to I lift it and remove the shorts. Her lacy black thong follows, and I steal onto the bed, spread her long legs, and crawl between them.

Her lips are already dewy and warm when I drag a finger up them. She coos quietly in her sleep as I spread them apart, groaning at the sight of her pink pussy glistening in the low light.

A dark growl rumbles in my chest as I settle between her thighs and drag my tongue up her slit. I do it again, using a little more pressure as I slide the tip up between her lips and let it dance over her swollen clit.

Milena whimpers. Her body writhes, and her hips rise as if greedy to get more of my mouth on her.

Good girl.

I push my tongue into her, tasting her sweet cunt as she moans a little louder. I look up her body, over her taut stomach and to her small dancer's tits with those oh-so-tempting pale pink nipples. Her face caves slightly, her brow furrowing as her mouth opens in soft, quiet pleasure.

My tongue swirls over her clit again, harder.

Suddenly, her eyes open.

For a second, she's totally confused, her eyes snapping from half-lidded to wide as fuck as she stares down at me lying between her legs. Her mouth opens, her brows shoot up.

Before she can say anything or try to push me away, my lips wrap around her clit. I sink two fingers into her, curling them against her g-spot as I suck hard on her swollen little nub and roll my tongue over it.

"*Nero*…" she moans, writhing as her legs try to clamp down around my head. I give her inner thigh a smart smack, making her whimper in a way that has my cock aching and leaking precum all over the bedsheets.

I growl into her pussy, tonguing her velvety soft lips as she drips all over my mouth and chin. Fuck me, she tastes like the sweetest heaven. Like something I have no right to be devouring. Too pretty. Too *pure*. Too unsullied for the beast inside me that wants to rip her open and feast on her fucking soul.

I'm going to do it anyway.

She gasps sharply, her back arcing violently off the bed as I suck harder on her clit. I push my fingers into her eager pussy again, stroking in and out as she humps my hand.

Her breath catches, her body twisting under my mouth as I tongue her swollen clit, still fingering her messy cunt, until her spread thighs are shaking against my shoulders and I see her stomach muscles clench as her pussy milks my fingers.

Her hands tighten to fists in the bedsheets. Her back arches as her head falls back, her mouth open, a low whine of pleasure filling the room.

"*Wait! Nero, I—*"

She goes to push me away, as if she *doesn't* want to come all over my tongue.

Rude?

That's fucking happening right now whether she wants it or not.

…And let's be real, she does.

I slap her thigh sharply again, making her squeal as her pussy tightens like a vice around my fingers, dripping all over them. Her clit pulses against my tongue as I suck it mercilessly. Her hands drop to my hair, as if to push me away again.

Someone *really* needs to learn her lesson.

I smack her thighs again.

Then again, and again, and a fourth time. Her squeals and whimpered moans fill the heavy air as I keep tonguing and sucking her swollen clit and slapping her thighs. My fingers ram into her, stroking that spot just inside as I feel her whole body tighten and tense.

Her breath catches, and suddenly, her body jerks violently as she slams a hand over her mouth.

"*I'm coming!!*" she screams through her hand, a wrenched cry ripping from her throat. Her body twists and shakes, her hips bucking hard against my mouth, shamelessly humping my tongue like a greedy little slut.

Milena is still shaking as I slide up her body between her legs, a low, hungry, growl rumbling in my chest. I bite and suck and nibble at her stomach and hips. She cries out as my teeth drag over her skin, making her belly cave beneath the heat of my mouth.

I take a bruised pale pink nipple in my teeth, biting down and drawing a sharp scream of pleasure and pain from her throat before I wrap my lips around it and suck gently.

My hands cup her tits, my mouth sliding from one eager, swollen nipple to the other as my fat cock drags against her messy little pussy.

My hips roll, my teeth only releasing her nipple at the last moment. I groan as I look down at the mauled mess I've made of her tits: bruised, swollen and red.

Then I kiss her, hard. I push my tongue between her lips, feasting on her mouth as I center my dick against her tight little hole. Milena moans eagerly against me, lifting her hips as she kisses me back, tasting her own arousal on my mouth.

I ram into her with one brutal stroke, swallowing her scream as she clings to me tightly. Her thighs clamp around my hips. Her nails dig in and rake down my back like hot knives, ripping a snarl from the back of my throat as I grind into her and kiss her hard enough to bruise.

"Nero…"

I draw back and ram my swollen cock back into her again, gritting my teeth at how fucking tight she is. Milena moans, lifting her hips to meet my thrusts as her head tilts to the side. My eyes lock onto that fucking ponytail that seems to have made it its mission in life to beg me to wrap it around my fist and *tug*.

I push deeper, dropping my mouth to her neck and running my teeth over the soft, delicate skin. Milena moans, squirming against me and clawing at my chest.

"*Nero*…"

I bite down on her neck as I roll my hips and bury myself again in her molten heat. She's still pawing at my chest as I rut into her.

"*Nero*—"

"Was this dripping little pussy dreaming about—"

"Why did you leave?"

The question slams into me at the same moment I realize she's not clawing my chest, she's *pushing it away*.

I go still, the red haze of lust fading slightly as I look down into her eyes.

Milena's bottom lip retreats between her teeth as she looks up at me with those big blue eyes that wreck me more than they fucking should.

"The other day," she whispers, both of us panting as we stop grinding together, my cock still buried deep. "At Greymoor. Why did you—"

My jaw tightens.

"It doesn't matter," I growl quietly. A whimper rips from her throat, her eyes rolling back as I draw my cock almost all the way out and then thrust back in.

I start to fuck her again, but then there's that hand, patting my chest to stop me.

So I do.

Begrudgingly.

"It matters to *me*," she murmurs, her pulse still hammering madly in her neck. Her body still twitching and trembling. Her pussy still rippling up and down my dick like it's already bored of this conversation and wants me to keep fucking it.

"Look—"

"Was it something I said?"

My brows knit into a scowl. "It's not you," I mutter. "It's—"

"Oh my *god*," she groans. "*It's not you, it's me*? Seriously?"

I rest my fists on either side of her head, my arms tense as I hover above her.

Her legs are still wrapped tight around me. Her needy pussy is still clinging to me and squeezing my dick like it *really* hasn't gotten the message that, technically speaking, we're not fucking right now.

My eyes lock on hers.

"You like to play in the dark, princess."

She frowns. “Yes, but you’re avoiding the question. Why—”

“I fucking *live there*,” I growl. “You’re—”

“What?” she snaps testily. “A *tourist*?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Your words.”

A blue the color of storm clouds blooms in her eyes as they darken. “So—what, you left because you decided I wasn’t kinky enough for you? You can’t seriously believe that after what happened prior to you walking the fuck out.”

I.e., me chasing her through a haunted mansion, slamming her down on the stairs, and fucking her like I was trying to rape her.

She’s right: if we can agree that she was *very* into that—and she *was*—then it’s hard to imagine me thinking she wasn’t up to a certain level of kink.

Except I’m not talking about kinks. I’m not talking about what weird, fucked-up shit gets me hard and her wet.

I’m talking about the scars that were carved into my psyche fifteen years ago.

Part of me wants to explain that, even in the vaguest terms. But that part of me is buried so deep in the mud, and the walls around that mud are so thick, that even *I* can’t get through to dig it all up.

I’m still hard when I slowly pull out and sit back on my haunches. A shadow ripples over Milena’s face as she scoots away from me, drawing her knees up to her chin and tugging the comforter over her again.

“You don’t want my brand of dark,” I growl. “Trust me.”

“You mean you don’t want to act those dark parts out with *me*,” she snaps.

“Is that what I said?” My eyes narrow. “Princess, I am *telling you*, you don’t—”

“You don’t get to make those decisions for me,” she hisses. “You don’t get to decide what I can and can’t handle, or what’s too fucked up for me.”

Our eyes clash—icy blue versus poisonous green. Her lips curl into a sneer. “Or is all this just because I called you a little troublem—”

“*Do not* fucking say that,” I snarl.

Her eyes glint maliciously. “Big tough guy who gets hard chasing girls through the dark, and he gets all pouty over a stupid name a *child* would let roll off their shoulders.”

My jaw tightens. She’s playing with a fire she doesn’t understand.

“I’m *warning you*, princess,” I hiss.

“Pussy.”

She’s obviously goading me. The problem is, it’s fucking *working*. Not because I’m pathetic. But because this girl seems to have a way of getting under my skin and fucking *living* there. The more she goads me, the more I want to pin her down and fuck that goddamn mouth until it’s drooling all over my dick.

“Stop it,” I snap.

“Or what, *pussy*?” she smiles. “Are you only into it if the girl isn’t? Is that it?”

“You need to be extremely fucking careful,” I hiss through clenched teeth, “what words next come out of your mouth—”

It doesn’t even register immediately. One second, I’m kneeling on the bed facing her, and the next, she’s right in front of me, and my face is throbbing.

…Because she just fucking *slapped me*.

I’m *rarely* at a loss for words. But in that moment, I'm only capable of staring at her, a stunned, furious look frozen on my face.

My cheek pulses with heat as she leans into me, bringing her lips to my ear.

"*Do whatever you fucking want*," she breathes. "Let's see who can handle what—"

A choked, whimpered cry lodges in her chest as my hand jerks out and wraps around her fucking throat. Her eyes glaze over with need and heat as my fingers tighten on her delicate, pale skin, my lips curling into a vicious snarl.

She gasps sharply through the pressure on her windpipe as I reach up with my other hand, grab her ponytail in a fist, and yank her head back.

"For the fucking record," I growl, leaning close, "this is what is called *asking for it*."

She whimpers again when I shove her away, sending her back onto the bed.

I slide off and stalk across the floor to where I discarded my clothes, yanking my belt from the loops of my trousers with a tug that makes the leather snap.

Milena's breath catches in a staccato tremble as I slowly turn to her. My eyes are dark as I prowl back to the bed. She's staring at me with eyes that suggest she's just realized *exactly* how much she's just tried to bite off when it comes to me.

Too late if she wants to backpedal now.

Way too late.

Milena moans as I grab her wrists and wrap my belt tightly around them. She shudders as I tug her back roughly over the sheets until I've got her bound wrists pinned to the headboard.

Leather wrapped around iron, looped twice and then knotted tight.

My blood roars in my veins as my cock twitches and pulses, dripping precum as I wrap my hand around it and stroke it slowly.

Milena swallows nervously, her chest rising and falling quickly. Her nipples are tight and pebbled, her eyes wide as her pink tongue darts out to wet her lips.

"Wait, Nero—"

"Your mouth just wrote a *fat* check, princess," I rasp as I move onto the bed.

She chokes on another gasp as I swing a leg over her body and kneel astride her chest, my hot cock lying thick and heavy between her tits.

"Let's see what happens when I cash it."

Her lips tremble, her big blue eyes going wide as they look up into mine.

"Nero—"

"No talking. I only have one use for your mouth right now."

Electricity hums through my body as I wrap that goddamn ponytail around my fist. I move up her body until my dick is bobbing right over her face.

"Now open wide," I hiss, "and *suck* like a good girl."

I slip my balls into her mouth first. She mumbles something, but the words are lost as her lips open wide. My cock drapes over her face, and I groan when her tongue dances over and teases my balls.

"I said suck them, not give them a fucking kiss," I growl.

She obeys. Pleasure sparks through my body as she takes my heavy balls into her hot little mouth one at a time. Loud slurping sounds fill her bedroom as she tongues them wetly, making my dick twitch and leak more precum.

"*Harder*, princess," I grunt through clenched teeth.

Fucking hell.

I groan, my eyes locked on hers as her cheeks hollow, getting both of my balls into her mouth and swirling her tongue around them. The veins on my dick stand out, the head so fucking swollen and fat that my head is swimming.

I pull away slowly, relishing the soft, wet *plopping* sound of my balls slipping from her mouth. My hand tightens on her ponytail, bringing her head up a little as I push my cock against her lips.

"Every time I see this fucking ponytail, I want to grab it in my fist and fuck your throat." My eyes glint down at her. "Open wide, princess."

Milena whimpers, opening her mouth and taking my head inside. With a grunt, I rock my hips forward, fucking my cock all the way into the back of her throat.

She chokes and whimpers, slobbering all over my dick as her eyes bulge. She looks up at me, baby-blues glazed over in desire as they water at the corners.

"You want to play in my fucking world, princess?" I snarl.

She moans, a deep, vibrating "*mmmm-hmmm*" sound that makes my balls tingle as she sucks on my cock. My teeth grind as I pull out, keeping just the head inside her mouth before I ram back into her throat.

Another choke. Another moan that gets me even harder. Another cough as thick drool covers my cock and drips out the corners of her mouth. I flex my legs, getting up on my knees and beginning to thrust into her mouth, using my grip on her ponytail to pull her onto my dick as she swallows me whole.

Thrust.

Gag.

Thrust.

Dribble.

Thrust.

She moans deeply, her eyes rolling back as I fuck her mouth harder and deeper. Eager, wet noises come from her throat and mouth, like she's getting off on how roughly I'm using her.

No, not *like* she is.

She literally *is*.

I can feel her body writhing and twisting under me, and see her shamelessly rubbing her thighs together, desperate for the friction between her legs.

I chuckle as my eyes drag back to hers, fisting her hair tighter as I use her mouth.

"Such a good girl," I growl. "Getting that slutty pussy all warmed up for me."

She whimpers around my cock as I wetly fuck her throat.

"Such a needy thing," I murmur, fisting her hair with one hand and stroking the back of a finger of the other one down her jaw, stretching it open. "Did that greedy little cunt miss me tearing it open and stuffing it full of my big cock?"

She moans, tears slipping from the corners of her eyes as they roll back.

"Don't worry, princess, I'll feed your hungry cum hole soon."

I grunt as I ram my cock over her tongue a few more times, then pull out. She chokes, sputters and gasps, her face a mess of precum and spit, her lips swollen and raw, her eyes wild with lust as they stab into mine.

In one move, I slide down her body and crush my mouth to hers. She moans into me, her body writhing against me as if she's so desperate to come that the sheer friction of her skin against mine might just do it.

But she doesn't get off that easily. So to speak.

I reach behind me, grabbing the panties I peeled off her earlier. Milena's eyes go wide as I bring them up to her face.

"*Fuck*," she moans. "*Nero*—"

She whimpers as I gag her with them, groaning at the sight of her: panties stuffed between her puffy, swollen lips, eyes glazed

over, cheeks covered in my precum, wrists still bound to the headboard above her.

I grab the backs of her knees and shove her legs right up to her chest, gliding my raging hard cock up and down her dripping pussy.

“What a desperate, drippy mess you are, princess,” I groan. “Such an eager fuck-toy.” She moans into her panties as I wind up and smack her ass with an open palm, feeling her pussy leak all over my dick when I do.

“*My* little fuck-toy.”

Milena screams into the gag, her body arching off the bed and her bound hands clawing frantically at the air as I thrust into her with one brutal stroke.

FUCK, she's wet.

Lewd squelching sounds fill her bedroom as I pound into her, her tight, greedy hole clinging to me more desperately with every thrust. My hips crash against her ass as I ram into her, filling her cunt with my dick over and over.

Milena. Goes. *Wild*.

She thrashes underneath me, hips jerking up to meet me as her hungry pussy swallows my cock. My balls and thighs are soaked with her wetness as I fuck into her, leaning over her body.

“No hands to fight me off,” I growl against her throat. “No legs to run away. Just an eager, slutty little hole for me to use.”

She wanted my everything.

She’s going to get it—uncensored, unabridged, undiluted.

“*Scream* for me, baby. Let the whole fucking house know who *owns* this cunt. Let the fucking *neighbors* know how fucking horny you get for my fat fucking dick.”

Milena howls and moans into the panties stuffed in her mouth, her eyes rolling back unfocused and wild, her face red as she screams into the lace. Drool drips down her cheek from the corners of her mouth as her throat hums raggedly.

I grunt as I pound into her, my balls slapping her ass with every thrust. I reach between us and pinch a nipple between my thumb and forefinger, twisting it mercilessly. I groan as I slide my cock out of her, fisting it as she whines, desperately trying to lift her hips.

I sit back, grabbing her legs behind her knees and spreading them wide apart. Then I wrap my hand around my cock again and slap the thick head against her swollen clit, making her scream and choke into her panty-gag.

I rub and slap the head of my dick against her clit again and again. Her eyes roll back, her body starting to clench and tremble. Her legs shake, and the muscles of her shoulders and arms strain tight when she squeezes her eyes shut and *screams* into the lace as she comes.

Her pussy floods my cock with slick wetness, dripping down my balls and soaking the sheets. Then she shudders and goes slack, collapsing into the bed.

My lips curl viciously.

“Oh, *no no no*, princess,” I murmur darkly, stroking my cock as I reach up and brutally pinch one of her nipples again. “You're not done yet.”

Her eyes snap to mine as I push the head of my cock between her slick, pink lips.

“You think coming *once* earns you mercy?” I shake my head. “*How cute*.”

She chokes, her body spasming off the bed as I slam all the way into her with one stroke. Her pussy strangles my cock, squeezing me so fucking tight that I have to fight to slide out and then back in again.

“*Fuck yeah*,” I snarl, gritting my teeth as I thrust into her again. “That’s it, baby. Milk my fat fucking dick. Show me what a greedy little cock slut you are.”

Milena whimpers, twisting under me and rolling her hips to meet my thrusts. I throw her legs over my shoulders and pound into her, lifting her ass right off the bed as I fuck her hard and deep, making her tits shake and her eyes roll back.

My heavy balls slap her ass, and I reach up to wrap my fingers around her throat again. Our eyes lock and I start to squeeze as I pound into her.

With a jolt and a low, guttural whine from deep in her chest, her whole body shudders violently. Another wave of slick wetness floods my dick, making a mess of both of us as I pound into her harder and rougher, using her body like my personal fuck-toy as she screams and writhes and claws at the air again as yet another orgasm crashes through her body.

"Mmm, baby, I love the way your cunt squeezes my dick. Give me some more of your cum, princess. Let me feel your greedy little pussy come all over my big fucking cock again."

I thrust deep, squeezing her throat.

She shatters again, her legs shaking and quivering, draped over my shoulders, her eyes rolling back in her head.

Milena goes limp as I fuck her spent body like a rag doll. I can feel her pussy clenching and rippling up and down my cock—even if the rest of her has tapped out, her pussy's not ready to throw in the towel yet.

"That little pussy is still begging for it, baby. Still *defying* me. *Fuck*, princess. The way your messy cunt comes apart for me and makes such a fucking mess makes me never want to stop."

I reach down and pinch her clit.

It's like pulling a *trigger*.

She's so overstimulated, so fucking high from coming so much, that all it takes is one little roll of my fingers over her swollen button for her to completely detonate again, flooding my dick with another wave of her cum.

I don't stop.

I can barely focus. My own orgasm is snarling, demanding to explode from me. But I grit my teeth and I force it back down, pounding her messy little pussy again and again.

As utterly limp as she is, Milena's not done either. When her haggard, glazed-over eyes swivel and lock with mine, I can see the sheer determination in them.

Don't stop.

Keep fucking going.

You will not win this battle.

I grunt, my balls so full of cum that it almost hurts as I pound into her.

"You gonna pass out on me, princess?" I groan, fucking her harder, making her tits bounce as I reach up to pinch a nipple.

Milena chokes out a moan, her head rolling from side to side as if to say no.

"Go ahead if you need to," I growl. "I'll just keep fucking this pretty little hole. I think we both know how wet you get when I play with you in your sleep."

This is no longer fucking.

It's an endurance race.

A marathon into oblivion, together.

Sweat glistens on her skin and drips down my back. The world around us becomes a mad blur. My cock is so over-used that it *hurts*.

But the way her choked, whimpered little moans punch out of her in sharp, staccato breaths as I fuck her has me spiraling toward the abyss, and I'm determined to take her with me.

"Eyes on me, princess," I grunt. "Look me in the eye when this hungry little pussy comes one more time. Let me feel it, baby girl. Let me feel that fucking cum flood my balls. Be a good girl and *fucking come for me right now*."

My hand tightens around her throat hard enough to make her face darken. My thumb rolls her clit as my cock thrusts deep into

her molten pussy, fucked raw.

She breaks in real time.

She's a whimpering, drooling, limp little fuck-doll when that final orgasm hits, but then it's like someone just plugged her into a live wire.

Milena's body twists and writhes, almost wrenching in half as her back arches violently. A raw, primal sound roars from her throat and her eyes bulge wide as her legs kick and clench and shake viciously.

Just as she goes completely boneless, I pull out of her with a snarled groan. I move up her body, straddle her chest, and lock eyes with her as I stroke my veined, swollen cock.

With a choked roar, my cum explodes out in thick, heavy ropes, splattering across her face, her neck, her tits, covering the soaked panties stuffed into her mouth. She moans, still writhing, her eyes rolling back like she's in another fucking dimension as I fist my cock and empty my balls over her.

The room is spinning, my vision turning dark at the corners. I barely catch myself as I fall forward, one hand on the headboard. Milena is utterly limp on the bed as I undo the belt and let her arms drop.

My body feels numb as I somehow stagger to her bathroom, grab a cloth, and wet it with warm water.

She's almost out when I crash onto her bed. I pull the panties from her slack mouth and clean her face with the washcloth.

My lips find hers, and I kiss her as I pull her into my arms.

"*Fuck…"* she barely breathes out, her eyes still closed. "…*you*."

I frown, blinking as I pull back, my brows furrowed heavily. Then her lips pull into a lazy grin, and one eye barely opens to look at me.

"*…For ever doubting me,*" she mumbles with a sleepy smile. "*You're…lucky I decided to give you a break, asshole.*"

I grin. So does she. Then her eye closes once again.

Darkness starts to pull me under as I drop back onto her bed. I feel her skin and her warm breath, her cheek lying on my chest.

Marathon over.

I think this might be a draw.

That means more than I can comprehend right now.

22

MILENA

MADAME KUZMINA HAS TOLD me about eleven million times that repetition of the impossible makes it not only possible, but routine.

I'm beginning think that might translate *far* past ballet into the madness that has become my…whatever I'm doing with Nero.

Because it appears repetition of *insanity* turns it not just into *sanity*.

It turns it into the *norm*.

Not normal is my *new* normal, and I'm not sure I have anything bad to say about that. Sure, my body kind of hates me these days, and that's saying something after a lifetime of ballet training.

To say that I'm sore would be the understatement of the century. My new skin tone could be described as purplish-blue, sometimes with a hint of yellow-green, from the bruises on my…well, everything. It's to the point that, in addition to all the long-sleeve shirts and pants instead of tank tops and skirts, I might be single-handedly bringing turtlenecks back into fashion.

Scarves, too, but I'm not the trendsetter there. That honor would go to Lyra, who has acquired quite a collection of them since she married Carmine Barone.

When I was ten, I walked into a Sephora in Soho, and for reasons that to this day escape me, decided I was going to steal a tube of lipstick.

Ignoring the fact that money has literally never been something I had to worry about, I was *ten*. I didn't even wear lipstick. I only decided to steal because I'd seen someone do it in a movie and I wanted to know what it felt like.

Just after I'd finally worked up the courage to slip the lipstick into my pocket, I remember looking up and locking eyes with a girl who looked about fifteen, standing ten feet away.

….Doing *the exact same thing* with a tube of concealer.

We both knew what we were doing was wrong, but in that adrenaline-fueled moment, we had a mutual understanding. Smile, don't say a word, go your separate ways. Which is exactly what happened.

Later, I confessed my crime to Vasilisa after the guilt got to me. She promised not to tell Papa as long as I went back to the store with her and told them that I'd forgotten to pay for something. Luckily, they were very understanding. Or maybe Vasilisa scared them when she laid the Russian accent on extra thick.

In any case, that's the same feeling I get these days when Lyra and I both show up to rehearsal wearing silk scarves around our necks: we both know what's up. We both just smile, and blush, and there's an unspoken agreement not to talk about it *at all*.

Unfortunately, none of my other friends give me a similar pass on my bruised state. Brooklyn and Naomi have made it their mission to all but pin me to the lockers and inspect me when we're changing, then give me knowing looks and grins whenever they spot new hand-shaped bruises anywhere on my body. Val manages to work the word "choke" into almost every conversation, while looking at me with a pointed, shit-eating grin.

And Evelina—poor, sweet Evelina—doesn't know what to say, ever since Naomi finally explained to her that the bruises were *not* a sign that I was clumsy.

"It's called *getting your freak on*," Brooklyn had snickered, which of course made poor Evie turn the color of ketchup as her jaw hit the floor.

But like I said, the insane has become my new normal.

And again, I'm not really complaining.

I collapse back onto the couch, groaning as Nero's thick—sweet *God*, is he thick—cock slips out of me with a wet sound. I sink into the cushions, still catching my breath, copious quantities of…well…*him* dripping out of me.

We're at Greymoor, which has become sort of our go-to place.

…Lots of room for running, right?

My chest rises and falls, my skin still tingling and sheened with sweat from the chase and the raw, brutal fucking that followed. My poor vagina feels savaged. My nipples are on fire. Even my ass feels sore, after Nero made me kneel down, bent me over an ottoman, and railed me from behind while slipping *two* fingers in my ass at the same time.

Honestly, I didn't think I'd like that.

But, again, purple and blue is the new black, insanity is the new sanity, and I ended up having my fourth or fifth orgasm of the night when he did it.

I glance down at myself, my brow furrowing as I drink in the state of my body. Fresh, vicious bruises overlay old ones and previously unmarked skin, covering my breasts, my thighs, my waist and hips…everywhere.

If this keeps up, I'm going to start needing serious medical care. It's already a miracle I haven't gotten a UTI, even with the tons of cranberry juice I've been drinking daily as a preemptive measure.

Nero sprawls back against the arm of the couch opposite me, his lean, muscled body glistening with perspiration. His tattoos ripple as his body flexes with his breath. He shoves his fingers languidly through his dark hair, his piercing green eyes glinting in the low light.

I blush as my eyes land on his chin and mouth.

They're slicked with my cum and a few drops of blood from where he bit my fucking thigh like a goddamn animal.

Woooorth it.

His eyes slowly drift down my body, and I subtly tuck my feet under one of the couch cushions.

It's going to sound nauseatingly vain, but I know I'm pretty. My mother was gorgeous, Papa looks like a Hollywood actor aging like fine wine, and I've been in peak physical shape for my entire life.

But I absolutely *hate* my feet.

Gnarled. Scarred. Misshapen. Calloused. Twisted into grotesque, knobby things.

I mean, I don't give a shit at ballet, because *everyone's* feet look like that there. But I won't even walk around Papa's house without a pair of socks on.

I know it's weird, but it's my one toxic trait when it comes to my own body image.

As I shift on the couch, I suddenly wince at the bite on my thigh, not to mention the fresh bruises.

Nero notices just as he's reaching for the pack of cigarettes and brass Zippo on the side table that have become our post-hunt vice. I just shake my head.

"I'm fine."

His scowl deepens, and he stands.

"Wait here."

I keep my eyes shamelessly glued to his abso-fucking-lutely *perfect* ass as he stalks from the room. I hear him walk up the stairs to the third floor, then frown in confusion when there's a banging warble and what might be water rushing.

A few minutes later, I hear him come back down the stairs. He strides back into the parlor where we ended our chase. Instead of sitting back on the couch, he walks right over to me and scoops me up into his arms, like I'm a damsel in distress.

I gasp as he strides out of the room and up the stairs. For a second, I think we're going into the bedroom, but then Nero hooks a right at the top of the steps.

"Where are we—"

I blink, my words cutting off as we step into a large, gorgeous old-world tiled bathroom. There's at least five or six of these in the mansion, but like the electricity, the water doesn't work.

Wait, what?

That theory flies out the window as Nero lowers me into an old claw-foot tube filled with warm, bubbly water. I blink in surprise as I lean back, the hot water instantly soothing my aches as Nero reaches over and turns off the faucet.

"*How…?*"

He turns toward me, smirking.

"I've had a little work done on the house."

I exhale slowly, groaning as the water soaks my soreness away.

"A *little*?"

He shrugs. "It needed it. Got a little old coming here and not having any water."

I grin. Then slowly, a not-so-fun thought enters my head unbidden.

"How…" I clear my throat. "How often do you come here these days?"

It's not always *here*, but I've been with him at least every other night the last couple of weeks.

Yeah. Every *other* night…

Nero shrugs as he sits naked on a small wooden footstool next to the tub, slips a cigarette between his lips, and deftly lights it.

"Fairly frequently."

My lips purse.

"For chases?"

He plucks the cigarette from his lips and passes it to me, holding it for me while I take a small drag and then blow it out the side of my mouth.

"I don't like the idea of other girls being in this position," I finally say tightly.

"In my bathtub?"

I glare at him. "*Naked* with you, after being *chased* by you," I say.

He grins, inhaling smoke slowly. "No one gets invited here but you, princess," he murmurs. "You can put the claws away."

I can feel my face heating as he eyes me.

"I'm fixing the place up here and there because I might move in one day."

My brows arch. "Really?"

He shrugs and passes me the cigarette again.

"I know. It's a creepy-ass haunted house. But I love this place. Always have."

I feel a grin tug at the corners of my lips.

"So do I, actually. When we used to dare each other to run past it, I'd always slow down a bit and imagine what it would look like with lights on inside." I shrug. "I think it's a beautiful house—well, could be."

Nero says nothing, just looks at me curiously with those emerald-green eyes as the smoke curls around his head like a halo.

Still without a word, he turns and picks up a washcloth and a bar of soap, dipping the former into the warm water before lathering it up.

"What—"

"Turn."

I immediately obey, scooching around and presenting my back to him. My breath catches as I feel the wet, warm cloth start to move over my back.

"What are you—"

"Washing you. Hold still."

And just like that, Nero freaking De Luca, the wolfish, monstrous, possibly sociopathic lord of darkness gently starts to *give me a bath*.

He starts with my back. Then does my neck and arms. He even has me lift them, to get my armpits. Then he has me turn around and washes my front—always carefully avoiding the fresher bruises.

"Up."

"Nero—"

"*Princess*."

I flush, rolling my eyes before I finally stand. He cleans my legs, then my butt…then I'm shivering and biting my lip again as he runs the warm cloth higher between my legs, gingerly cleaning both my pussy and the bite he gave me on my inner thigh.

"Is Leo Debolsky still sniffing around you?"

My lips curl into a smirk.

"Uh, *no*." I laugh quietly. "Uncle Levka likes the idea of our families *joining*," I groan, rolling my eyes. "For political reasons. Papa isn't interested."

"What about you?"

"Oh, he's who I think of whenever you and I—*aiiee!*"

I giggle-squeal as Nero swats my ass with an open palm.

"*Joking*," I laugh. "*Obviously*."

He glares at me, but he's biting back a smile of his own.

"I really don't, you know. Bring other girls here, I mean."

A tingle ripples through me as he pulls the washcloth away, letting me lower myself into the sudsy warmth of the tub again.

"*Well*," I huff, half meaning it, "you were going to bring Alicia here."

He smirks. "To chase, maybe. But that would have been it."

I eye him with utter skepticism.

"*Just* to chase."

He nods. "Is that so hard to believe?"

I snort. "Kind of."

Nero exhales and passes me the cigarette again. "I…" He looks away, frowning.

"Tell me," I suddenly say quietly. My hand slips out of the water, and before I know it, I'm taking his hand in mine.

I'm not sure why I do it. It feels bizarrely intimate.

“I get off on the chase itself,” he growls. “The sex is…*fine*.”

I glare daggers at him. Nero smirks, chuckling quietly.

“Poor choice of words, sorry.”

“*I’ll* say,” I mutter.

“Present company excepted, *obviously*.”

His hand slips from mine, snakes over the edge of the tub, and dips into the water. I gasp, shuddering and feeling fire spark in my core as his hand slides up between my legs to cup my pussy.

“*This* sex,” he growls, his voice rough, “is very *very* fucking good.”

He stubs the cigarette out in a little dish next to the tub and stands. I watch, my pulse picking up and my eyes shamelessly wandering over his gorgeous body as he steps into the hot water and sinks down, facing me.

His hand reaches for me under the bubbles, and I whimper when he cups my sex again. One of his thick fingers begins to trace up and down my lips lazily before he sinks a finger into me, taking my breath away.

Even as pleasure starts to hum through my body, the unanswered questions come too.

“Nero…”

“M-hmm?” he murmurs, rolling his fingertip over my clit, making me whimper.

“The other day…” I shake my head, my brow furrowing. “What was it that I said or did that put you off?”

His fingers pause for a second or two. Then I coo softly, my eyes fluttering shut when he starts to finger me again. But he remains silent, and when I open my eyes, he just shakes his head.

“Tell me.”

His head shakes again. “There are things about me you don’t want to know, princess,” he murmurs.

“You don’t know that. Try me.”

“*No*, Milena—”

I push his hand away from between my legs.

“No more of this, then.”

“Pass.”

I gasp when he puts his hand right back between my legs, then feel myself whimper as he pushes his finger back into me, curling so perfectly against my g-spot. Then I come to my senses, grab his hand, and push it away once more.

“*Tell me*,” I urge. “Or no pussy.”

“Are you familiar with the term cutting off your nose to spite your face, princess?”

I roll my eyes. “Are *you* familiar with the concept of *consent*?”

“Pretty sure that's a gray area for you.”

My face flushes. “Well, it’s a no—a *real* no—until you tell me.”

He eyes me hungrily. “And if I do it anyway?”

“It won’t be the fun kind of no,” I say quietly.

Darkness floods Nero's face as he leans back in the tub and looks away. His arm snakes out over the edge, and I watch with surprise as he pulls another cigarette out of the pack and lights it without fanfare.

He’s not really a smoker. The only time I've ever seen him do it is after we have sex, and only occasionally—not even every time. And it’s only the one.

Not two.

He sucks on it heavily, his brow furrowing as the shadow only grows over his face.

“Fine,” he mutters, still looking away as he sucks on the cigarette. “When I was thirteen, a family friend, a neighbor, decided it was a good age for me to start having sex.”

The words hit me like a punch to the face.

Oh my fucking God…

“*Nero*—”

“So for about three months,” he barrels on, his eyes burning into the wall, “she regularly had me over to her place, or hotels, and did what she wanted with me.”

A chill ripples down my spine despite the warm water.

“*Jesus*, Nero—”

“You wanted to know,” he hisses. “Here it fucking is.” His face darkens to midnight. “Here’s the really fun part. After a few months of this, her husband found out she was fucking someone else. Not that it was *me*, but…someone.”

He slowly turns, his eyes piercing into me, a haunted, faraway look in them.

“So he killed her…and then himself.”

My heart stops, breaking.

“*There*,” he snarls. “That's my fucking tragic villain origin story. We good now?”

I'm so numb that I’m barely aware of him pulling me into his lap, my legs on either side of his muscled hips. But when he reaches between my legs and runs a finger over my pussy, I flinch back to reality, my eyes suddenly focusing on him as my face caves.

“Nero, wait…one sec—”

“I don’t want to wait a sec.”

His finger sinks into me, but I reach for his wrist, tugging his hand away.

“You…what you just told me…”

“What I just told you, no one else in the world knows,” he murmurs. “Don’t spread it.”

I shake my head, my hands reaching out impulsively to cup his face, like I need to touch more of him, be nearer to him.

My brows furrow. “You never told—?”

“I never told *anyone*,” he murmurs. “Not my parents; *nobody*. Except you.”

His cock throbs between my inner thighs. I whimper quietly as he grips my ass and lifts me up, letting the thick, swollen head of his cock push between my lips.

“Wait, Nero, can we just talk—”

“I don’t want to wait,” he chokes. “And I don’t want to talk about it.”

His eyes lock with mine, and suddenly I'm drowning in the sadness and fury that swirls like green venom inside them.

“*Milena,*” he rasps through clenched teeth. “Right now, I want to feel something that makes me forget that. I want to think of *you*.” One of his hands slides up my back, wrapping my hair around his fist. “Think you can do help me do that?”

“*Yes*,” I choke, my heart breaking and melting at the same time as I lean in and press my forehead against his. “I can do that.”

“*Thank you*.”

My head tilts to the side as I press my lips to his, kissing him deeply, sinking down onto him.

I can do that.

23

MILENA

"I'm *so* glad we could do this, Milena."

I feel the exact opposite, motherfucker.

Still, I smile—not a genuine one, but a degree or two north of an utterly fake one—at Leo across the small bar table.

Obviously, this was *not* my idea. But Uncle Levka ambushed me when my head was still in the clouds after coming back from seeing Nero. He even had my father unwittingly in on the ambush too.

Apparently, both Leo and his father Vladimir reached out to Levka once again, trying to impress upon him the benefits of a deal between our families. My uncle felt that it was worth it to at least play ball with the Debolskys, even just to see how we might benefit from Vladimir Debolsky's newfound power given his seat on the Russian Aviation Council.

Papa—horrifically—agreed.

Of course, he was quick to take me aside and assure me, repeatedly, that in no way shape or form did he want me to even entertain the idea of marrying Leo; that I was *not* being "married off for politics"; and that he just felt *I* might be the best member of our family to feel out via Leo what any such deal might look like.

So that's why I'm here at a swanky midtown bar, having drinks with the guy.

Well, *I'm* having a drink—a real one, that is. But just the one. No way am I getting drunk around Leo after that mess in the Hamptons. I don't care if he's sober now.

Leo, meanwhile, is on his fourth virgin Arnold Palmer, sucking down the lemonade/iced tea combo like he needs it to survive.

Maybe sugar is his new alcohol.

"I'm always happy to talk business as it relates to my family," I say with another half-smile. "I hear your father is really making waves on the Aviation Council."

Leo giggles—legit *giggles*—as he drains his fourth glass and flamboyantly signals the waitress for a fifth. Then he turns back to me, face flushed as his eyes lock with mine.

"Yes, it's *very* exciting. My father's worked hard to establish our network both here and back in Moscow. And with this new position?" He whistles loudly. "Fucking hell, it's a license to print money."

I smile a bit more genuinely this time. "That's…incredible. Congratulations, Leo. That's really—"

"You could be a part of it," he grins, leering at me across the table.

I shrug my shoulders. "We could…talk about it."

Leo's eyes widen. "Wait, seriously?"

"About a *deal between our families*," I say, raising my palms. "Look, Leo, nothing personal, but—"

I'm cut off when the cocktail waitress brings over Leo's Arnold Palmer. He grins, looking right at me as he sucks down half of it in one pull.

"You were saying, beautiful?"

Fucking hell.

I smile tightly. "What I was *saying*, Leo, is that I'd love to—"

"I *knew* you'd come around."

The fake smile is starting to make my cheeks hurt.

"If you want to discuss a *business* arrangement between our families," I say carefully, "I can tell you openly that my father is quite interested in the idea. With his US connections, and your father's ability to move anything you want from Russia to anywhere in the world, that could be a seriously powerful alliance."

Leo nods, looking at me…specifically, my chest…like he's not listening to me, but imagining what's underneath my clothes.

It's creeping me out.

"Leo."

His eyes are glassy as they snap to mine. "Yes, Milena?"

"We were…" I clear my throat. "Talking about a potential business relationship between our families."

He sighs, waving a hand around. "Right, right. But how about…"

He gulps down the rest of his drink, slams the glass down a little too hard, then rests his elbows on the table as he leans across it toward me.

"How about we talk about *us*, Milena?"

What the *fuck*.

He doesn't say "Milena". It's more like a slurred *Mlil-ayy-nah*, with an extra "L" in there somewhere.

I frown as I peer at his glassy eyes and flushed face. At the unfocused way he's leering at me. The slurred words. The slumped posture.

My eyes drop to the empty glass of ice and lemon twists in front of him: the virgin Arnold Palmer.

"Virgin."

Shit.

Leo is *drunk*.

I smile at him. "Hold that thought. I'm just going to the ladies' room."

"Need a hand?" he leers at me.

"Pretty sure I'm all set," I say crisply as I stand and march to the back of the bar.

I find the waitress by the service bar, loading up a tray with cocktails.

"Hey, my friend over there…" I nod toward the puddle of Leo. "Those are virgin Arnold Palmers, right?"

Her look says it all as she shakes her head. "No, I've just been bringing what he ordered at the bar before you joined him. Vodka, lemonade, splash of iced tea."

Motherfucker.

"Is there a problem?"

Not at all, because I'm leaving.

"All good," I smile at her. "Can I settle up my part of the tab, though?"

"Of course, hon."

After I pay, I head back to the table. I *should* just leave, but even if Leo's secretly getting shitfaced, and *is not* sober these days

after all, I'm still representing the Kalishnik family. And I *did* come here on business.

The bar is more crowded now, with a mob of finance-bros in identical suits and four-hundred-dollar haircuts drinking shitty beer and jostling each other near our table.

Leo grins at me when I slide back into my seat.

"*Theeere* she is."

"Yep, here I am," I reply dryly. "Look, Leo, I actually need to take off—"

"Awww, what?" he groans loudly. "You just got here!"

"I know," I smile politely. "But, you know, time flies!"

Or…whatever.

"So, yes, we should definitely talk again about maybe working something out between my father and yours—"

I jolt as a hand lands heavily on my knee.

Leo's, under the table.

My smile drops like a stone as I shake his hand off.

"Don't do that."

"You know," he grins, "I always thought we could have had so much *fun* in the Hamptons that time."

I start to stand. Instantly, his hand grips my knee again.

He's a lot stronger than you'd think to look at him. And he's grabbing me *right* on a pretty fresh bruise from the other night, courtesy of Nero. So when he touches me I wince, and my leg gives out.

I drop back into the seat, gasping as his hand runs up my leg under my skirt.

"LEO, STOP!" I yell.

But the bar's loud, and there's a wall of finance bros with their backs to us.

I kick my leg, but the hand stays where it is.

"Leo!" I scream. "Take your fucking hand off—"

"Or *what*."

One second, he's gripping my thigh, sending chills up my spine. The next, his hand is shoving all the way up my skirt.

Bile rises in my throat as his sweaty hand cups my vagina through my panties. His fingers claw and tug, trying to wriggle under the lace to get at my sex.

And that's when I grab the table between us with both hands and send it crashing to the floor.

It actually gets the attention of the finance bros, who whirl as my vodka soda, ice, and shattered glassware all go skittering over their polished shoes.

"Dude, what the fuck!" one guy roars, whirling on Leo.

I seize my opportunity. As Leo turns to the guy, I shove his hand away, lurch to my feet, and bolt into the crowd.

My pulse is on fire. My body is trembling. A horrified, nauseous feeling curdles in my stomach as I shove my way through the bar patrons and go stumbling out the door—

Right into waiting hands.

I scream and thrash, clawing and gasping before they grab tighter, shaking me.

"*Milena!*"

I blink, my breath catching sharply as my eyes focus.

Nero.

His face is dark and lined as he frowns down at me, his eyes searching mine.

"Wh-wh—what are you doing here?!" I blurt.

"*What happened*," he growls.

The sick sensation is still roiling inside me. And before I know it, I'm hurling myself into his chest and clinging to him like my life depended on it.

The tears come hot and fast as I press my face to his chest and scream into his shirt. His strong arms surround me, holding me tight, quietly stroking my hair.

"*Leo*," I finally choke out, pulling back to look up at him with a tear-stained face. "Fucking *Leo Debolsky* happened." I'm shaking as I look at him with pleading eyes. "I didn't want to come. I thought it would be a business thing, and—"

"What happened," he growls again.

Not "Why are you out with Leo". Not "What the fuck".

What happened.

Tell me what you need.

"He's shitfaced," I blurt. "We were talking business, and I thought he was drinking virgin drinks, because apparently he's sober these days. Except—"

"He's not," Nero finishes.

I shake my head as my face falls. Nero cups my face gently.

"He *touched me*," I choke out. "Nero, he fucking shoved his hand under…under…"

I break again, tears flooding my face as he wraps me in his arms and pulls me into his chest. We stay like that for I don't know how long, him holding me, me crying against him.

Finally, I pull back and look up at him. A shiver ripples through me when I see the venomous look on his face.

"Get in the car, princess," he says quietly. I turn, blushing when I realize that we're not alone. A tall, built, good-looking guy with dark hair and a *great* suit is standing next to a sleek black Escalade, holding the back door open.

"What?"

"This is Dominic," Nero murmurs. "He's going to take you to my house."

I nod, dazed, forcing an awkward smile at Dominic as he and Nero shepherd me into the back seat. Then I turn, and frown when I see Nero isn't coming too.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

He steps close, reaching to cup my face.

"To fix something."

Then he leans in, and before I know it, he's kissing me.

Not the vicious, feral kisses we usually engage in.

This one is…normal.

Soft.

Comforting.

It leaves me tingling as he pulls away. He turns to Dominic and nods quickly.

“Take her to the house. Keep her safe. I’ll be home soon.”

.

Have you ever had a dream so vivid you woke up convinced it was real?

Because last night, I dreamed someone was chasing me. Through a dark house, maybe. But then I think it turned into a forest? It's fuzzy now. But I remember the way it felt, like something between terror and pure adrenaline.

And when I got caught, I knew it was you. Like, I just knew it was.

I know that probably sounds deranged, but you're the one who asked what makes me feel alive. So... there you go.

What makes me feel alive is that sensation somewhere between fear and thrill. Between feeling scared and feeling immortal.

You know, like the feeling you get when you tell your pen pal that you had a chase-kink dream about them, lol.

-Me

24

MILENA

So this is Nero's house.

His actual one, not the one where we play. It's a stunning, modern-meets-mid-century-meets gothic townhouse on Central Park West, not far up from Papa's place. It's right next to the infamous Dakota building and just across the street from both the John Lennon and Iggy Watts memorials in the park.

"Would you like a drink?"

I shake my head, hugging myself as I lean against the kitchen counter behind me. Across the kitchen Dominic, the guy who drove me here in silence from the bar in midtown, nods wordlessly. He turns and opens the fridge, grabs a bottle of water, then shuts the fridge again and leans against it.

He takes a sip, neither of us saying a word as a slightly awkward silence descends over the dimly lit kitchen.

"So…" I clear my throat. "You're Nero's driver?"

"*Consigliere*."

"Oh."

"And you're what's got him twisted up these days, I assume."

I blush and look down at my feet.

"I—we're not—"

"Oh, no, of *course* not," he says, smirking. He studies me carefully as he takes another sip. "Does Marko Kalishnik know his daughter is hanging out with the likes of Nero?"

I arch a brow. "I'm sorry, isn't Mr. De Luca your boss?"

He grins. "He's also my best friend. So I can ask. So… *I'm asking*," he says, more pointedly. "Does Marko know about this?"

I shrug. "My personal life is none of my father's—"

"Oh, I don't think either of us really believes that," he says flatly. "Italians and Russians just don't usually play well together, if you're curious why I'm asking."

"They don't?" I smile. "I'm not sure that Kir Nikolayev and Nero got that memo."

The second I say it, my mouth clamps shut.

Like, what the FUCK, self.

Dominic says nothing at first, just eyes me cooly as he takes another sip of water.

"What do you know about that," he finally says, a curious note in his voice.

I shrug. "I know they hang out."

"No, you don't."

"I've *seen* them."

Dominic's brow furrows. He sets the water down on the counter and folds his arms over his chest. "I'd not mention that if I were you," he growls.

"Who are you talking to?"

I jolt, turning quickly as a dark-haired girl walks into the kitchen wearing…

Not much.

She's in a somewhat skimpy camisole top that's a little on the see-through side, with just a pair of boy-short panties on underneath. And for a second, I see *red*.

Green.

Maybe both.

But then she suddenly realizes I'm standing there, and shrieks a little as she whirls and stares at me wide-eyed.

Suddenly, it clicks.

This is not *some girl*.

This is Gabriella De Luca. As in, Nero's sister.

We've only met once, sort of, at Doomsday. But that was…over a year ago? Still, the second I see her, it's obvious she and Nero are family. Same face, same nose, same dark hair, the *exact* same piercing green eyes.

Hers go wide as she jumps back and scrambles behind Dominic.

"Who the fuck are you?!"

"Milena," I smile weakly. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

She exhales, still clinging to Dominic, who looks more than slightly uncomfortable.

"All good." She flashes a killer smile and then glances down at herself. "I just…didn't realize anyone was up. I came down for water." She glances up at the back of Dominic's head and tugs on his arm. "Give me your jacket, Dom. I feel like a fucking stripper."

"Dressed like *that*? *Really*?" he mutters sarcastically, ignoring the way she elbows him in the back until he shrugs off his suit jacket and hands it to her.

She's swimming in it when she slips it on and closes it around herself. "Well, that was embarrassing," she mutters before she waves a hand limply. "I'm Gabby, Nero's sister." She glances at Dominic again, frowning. "Where's my brother?"

"Out."

"*Very* helpful, thank you, Dom," she says dryly before turning to me, frowning slightly. "Okay, so what are you doing here?"

"She's—"

"Waiting for your brother," I say.

"Okay…" She nods.

"Go back to bed, Gabriella," Dominic growls.

Gabby holds her middle finger right up to his face, still looking at me, her brow arched. "Are you…"

Heat floods my face before I can stop it. Gabby relaxes a bit as a grin creeps over her mouth.

"*Ahhh*, I *see*," she smiles. Then she peers at me again. "Wait—Milena *Kalishnik*?"

I smile even more weakly. "Yup."

Gabby frowns slightly. "He's not jerking you around, is he? Nero, I mean."

"I…don't think so?"

She nods, still frowning. “He doesn’t date, that’s why I ask.”

“Oh,” I blush. “I’m…not sure if we’re—”

“Gabriella,” Dominic interrupts. “Now is *not* the time. Go back to—”

“Eat me, Dom,” she blurts casually, still looking at me. “Girl-to-girl, mafia princess to mafia princess…” She eyes me up and down, sighing heavily. “You’re either dating or you’re wasting your time. And you are *way* too hot to have your time wasted by someone like my brother.”

I grin, rolling my eyes.

“Umm, thanks,” I mumble.

“So, force him to give you a real answer,” Gabby shrugs. “Otherwise?” She makes a tsking sound, shaking her head. “Seriously, *way* too hot to be wasting time on my brother being a dick. Know what I mean?”

“She knows what you mean,” Dominic mutters darkly as he looms over her. “And it is *time for bed*, Gabriella.”

She smirks as she turns to him. “Wanna tuck me in, Dom?”

He blushes.

Deeply.

Gabby turns back to me. “Nice to meet you. Sorry for walking in like a skank. I honestly didn’t know anyone was down here.”

I get the impression she didn’t know *I* was here. Dominic is maybe another story.

“She’s…” Dominic clears his throat once Gabby is well out of the room. “An interesting character.”

“Seems it,” I grin.

Just then, I hear a door shut, then heavy footsteps. A few seconds later, my pulse quickens as Nero stalks into the kitchen with a grim look on his face. He nods at Dom, then turns and strides over to me. My heart flip-flops in a strange, unexpected way as he takes my hands in his, those green eyes lancing into mine.

“Come with me,” he growls quietly.

25

NERO

"*What the fuck*?!"

I could have warned her what she'd see before I took her into the basement at Greymoor. But I didn't.

This is why she screams and jumps behind me when we get to the bottom of the stairs and she sees Leo fucking Debolsky tied to a chair.

Gag in his mouth.

Blood on his face.

Oh, yeah—and his right hand nailed to a board tied to the arm of his chair.

Sometimes you have a problem that isn't going to seriously hurt you, but is fucking annoying. A splinter, for instance: you're not going to bleed out. You don't need a surgeon or stitches. That splinter, though, is a *pain in the ass*.

You can't stop thinking about it. It's always just…*there*. Sometimes, it makes a real nuisance of itself by getting infected. Then you can't ignore it anymore.

Leo is the goddamn splinter in this analogy, if that wasn't already abundantly clear. And like a splinter, sometimes, you have to force the fucker out.

You have to take matters into your own hands to get rid of the problem.

That's what I did tonight.

Do I feel guilty that I was the one who paid the bartender to spike Leo's first drink? Or that I was the one who made sure Leo's subsequent Arnold Palmers, when re-ordered by the cocktail waitress, were made by that same bartender, who I'd slid three hundred bucks to, ensuring they had a little bit more booze in them each time? Until the last one was basically lemon- and tea-flavored vodka? Nope.

I knew the risk with her being there, but I didn't know he'd push things so far.

That I do feel guilty about. But I'm going to expel that guilt tonight, along with Leo's blood.

It started with me not liking the fact that the object of my affection was also catching the attention of this Russian douchebag. But then that "not liking it" factor began to ratchet up until it turned into something more like "fucking hating" the fact that he kept inserting himself into her life.

I did my homework. I discovered that Vladimir Debolsky is trying to use his new seat on the Aviation Council to forge deals with powerful New York families.

I also discovered that a few years ago Milena found herself out in the Hamptons with this fuck, and he tried to break down her goddamn bedroom door to get his filthy hands on her.

On the one hand… *I get it*.

On the other? He's a fucking dead man.

This splinter just tweaked my hand for the last time. And now, it's going to get removed.

For good.

"What the *fuck*?!" Milena blurts again from behind me, a horrified expression on her face as she looks at Leo.

Now's the part where I have to show her why eradicating this motherfucker is the only way forward here.

"I *was* just going to fuck up his hand and send the motherfucker home with a warning for touching you…"

I nod to his right hand—the one he touched her with: I know, because I made him tell me—nailed to the two-by-four tied to the arm of the chair.

"But then I found these in his car."

I walk over to a rickety table in the corner of the basement and hold up a baggie of pills and some zip ties.

Leo starts screaming into his gag, shaking his head frantically.

Okay, cards on the table, I *didn't* find these in Leo's car. But I *did* find several instances in his past where girls seemed to have a horrifying habit of waking up in his bed without clothes or memories after having a drink with him.

Girls who were later forced to sign NDAs and take measly sums of cash to shut the fuck up about Vladimir's son.

So, maybe Leo wasn't planning on drugging and raping Milena.

But I don't give a fuck. Just like I don't give a fuck if he's decided to be sober now.

He's a piece of shit, and worse, a piece of shit who landed on my radar for sniffing around and laying his hands on *what's mine*.

So, that's *probably* what he's bleating on about through his gag.

But fuck him.

"Shut your mouth, asshole," I snap. I exhale as I turn back to Milena. "This," I say, indicating the baggie, "is GHB. The date rape drug." Then I lift the zip ties, and her face goes white. "I think you can guess what his plans were."

I *do* feel guilty for lying to her right now. A lot, actually. But I'm also doing the world a fucking favor by getting rid of this shithead who got away with wrecking lives and hurting other girls for years.

Also, he touched her.

This was coming no matter what his past looked like.

Milena's mouth is grim, her eyes steely as she turns to stare at Leo.

"He was also ordering drinks with booze in them. Needless to say, he's *not* fucking sober."

Leo starts wailing and screaming into his gag again. This time, I let him carry on like a whiny little bitch.

"Oh—and there's no deal with Vladimir."

Yep. Barring a wedding between Leo and Milena—which, obviously, is *not* fucking happening—there's no arrangement between the Kalishnik and Debolsky families, not if Vladimir has anything to say about it.

"None of it was real, Milena," I say quietly.

She stares at the man tied to the chair, bleeding, sobbing into his gag and soaked in his own urine.

"It was all just to fuck you," I grunt. "He wanted to see you. Touch you. Put his tiny little dick inside you." I look at her, my lips curling a little as I beckon. "Come here, princess."

She swallows, biting her lip and walking over to me.

"I'm going to help him do *one* of those."

Before she can open her mouth, she's gasping sharply as I spin her around, pushing her hips against the table.

"Nero—"

She gasps again as I bend her over it, a hand on the small of her back.

“What the fuck—”

She squirms, then starts to thrash as I gently slide my hand under her skirt.

“What the *fuck* are you—*oh*—”

I can't help it. A goddamn hurricane could be touching down on top of us, and I’d *still* want to touch her. And kiss her, and taste her, and slide inside her.

I've always suspected she felt the same way about me. But when I slide my fingers under the edge of her panties and find her sweet pussy slick and wet for me, I *know* I was right.

“*Nero*…” she chokes, her breath catching in her throat as I run a finger up her pussy lips, under her skirt. “*What are you—*”

“Taking what’s mine,” I growl. “In front of the piece of shit who thinks otherwise.”

She whips her head around, staring at me with wide, shocked eyes.

“*Wait,*” she whimpers as I push my thumb through her slick lips and rub it over her throbbing clit. Her face turns bright red, and she buries it in her hands, unable to look at Leo as he screams into his gag not fifteen feet away.

“*Don’t be embarrassed, baby,*” I growl as I lean over her back, my lips at her ear as I push her blonde hair aside. “You’re not *sick*, or *fucked up*, or *broken* because you get wet when I put my hands on you.”

I groan as I press my throbbing erection against her ass through our clothes. Her pussy tightens around my finger, and she shivers.

“See?” I murmur. “If you’re sick, then so am I. If you’re fucked up, I am too. If you’re broken… We can be broken together.”

I grab a fistful of her skirt, dragging it a little up her thighs in the back.

“I—” She shivers again. “*I don’t want him to watch—*”

“Don’t worry princess,” I murmur low in her ear. “It’s the last thing he’ll ever see.”

Her spine snaps straight, and her head twists sharply, her eyes locking with mine.

“The *last* thing.”

Her mouth drops open as I slide two fingers into her molten cunt. Leo is screaming and thrashing, but we tune him out as my fingers stroke in and out of her. He can’t *see*-see her, but he can obviously tell what I’m doing when her face caves and a soft whimper falls from her lips.

I tug my zipper down and pull out my swollen cock. *That*, Leo probably gets a glimpse of. I don’t give a shit.

I ease my fingers out of her, rubbing her clit as I position the head of my dick against her dripping wet opening.

“*Nero…oh fuuuuck*…”

She moans as I slide into her, driving my hips forward and burying every inch of my thick cock in her tight little hole. Leo babbles in—English? Russian? I don’t know, and I don’t fucking care—as I draw out and then ram back into her.

Milena’s still got her face buried in her hands, her upper body bent across the table as I slowly fuck her against the edge of it. I groan, gritting my teeth as I start to move faster, my cock sliding out of her greedy little cunt as it clings to me before I thrust right back in.

My hips crash against her ass. I’m still hiding her nudity from view, keeping her skirt over her as I pound into her. But the wet sounds of us sliding together, and her whimpered little moans, fill the grimy basement as Leo looks on, helpless.

I start to fuck her even harder, my cock spreading her pussy wide as I ram into her. I grunt and grab her hair in a fist, hips pounding as I turn to look *right* at Leo.

“Listen to that, motherfucker,” I snarl. “This pussy’s *mine*. And watch closely,” I hiss, still glaring at him, “because her coming all over my cock is the last thing you’ll ever see. I want that to be what's in your brain when I send you to hell.”

With that, I grab her hip with one hand and yank her hair in the other, and I start to fuck the *shit* out of her.

My cock rams her over and over, making her moans and squeals grow louder and louder, until it's like she's forgotten that we're not alone. The sounds of her pleasure echo through the dank room as I pound into her from behind, feeling her eager little pussy strangle my dick until her legs start to quiver and shake.

With a sobbing cry, she collapses across the table, screaming out her orgasm as she floods my dick with her cum.

I slow, then gently slide out. I don't bother covering my cock as I turn and stroll over to Leo. His eye bulge, like he thinks I'm going to fuck *him* or something.

Honestly, he'd probably prefer that over what I'm actually about to do.

He doesn't realize what's happening until I'm two feet away and yanking the knife out from under my jacket. His eyes bulge, his body jolting, yanking at his binds as he screams and screams.

Fuck you, Leo.

You touched what's mine.

In one swift stroke, I draw my knife across his throat. There's a wet gurgling sound as a flood of sticky crimson pours down his chest.

I don't bother watching him die, just drop the knife to the ground, turn and walk back to Milena. She whimpers as I roughly pull her up onto the table, flip her over, and then lay her back, her legs spread wide around my hips.

My hand wraps around her throat as I guide myself back into her. My hips crash into her thighs, my cock fucking her drippy, greedy pussy as her unfettered, wild moans fill my ears.

She starts to turn her head to look over at Leo and see why he's stopped screaming. But I hold her jaw firmly, shaking my head as my cock rams into her over and over.

"Eyes on me, princess," I groan. "Always on me."

It's only then that I realize my hand around her throat has blood on it.

Not mine. Not hers.

The thought brings a feral grin to my lips as I start to fuck her recklessly. Wildly.

I feel like a fucking tribal chieftain or a goddamn warlord, still dripping with the blood of his enemies as he takes his woman after the battle,.

Suddenly, I'm up on the table with her, still fucking her, my bloody fingers still wrapped around her throat, kissing her with everything I have as she explodes beneath me and screams my name into my mouth, her pussy clamping down around my cock.

With a final groan, I bite her lip and pump rope after rope of hot cum into her as she clings to me, kissing me madly.

.

Not deranged at all.
I dream about chasing you all the time.

Be heard,
-Me

26

MILENA

FOR PART OF THE NIGHT, I have nightmares.

Floods of red blood. Muffled screams and a twisting, macabre mask of death.

But then the scenes of horror fade, and the darkness morphs into something different that sends an aching throb into my core. The shadows twist, hands and fingers and tongues materializing out of the blackness to caress, touch and lick.

Pleasure tingles over my skin and tightens between my legs. Needy hunger pulses through me, centering on my clit as I writhe and whimper, concentrating on the feeling between my thighs even as I gasp for more.

My eyes flutter open, and the shadows dissipate into morning sunlight filtering through the drawn curtains.

It all comes back: the basement at Greymoor. The blood. The sex. The madness.

I know now—*know*, without a doubt—that there's something wrong with me. I didn't just *not fight* Nero when he fucked me in front of Leo.

I *craved* it. Not just the sex, but the leering, snarling darkness that came with it. Stepping into Nero's madness, seeing the world through the lens of his viciousness, made me so fucking wet that I should hate myself for it.

I don't.

Maybe it should feel weird that I watched him kill someone last night right in front of me. That I watched someone die.

But there's just this sense of relief.

My mind replays the way I watched, wide-eyed and still throbbing from his cock as Nero walked over and calmly slit Leo's throat, then walked back to me, blood on his hands as he flipped me over, wrapped his fingers around my throat, and fucked me again, looking into my eyes as I gave myself over to damnation.

I remember him carrying me upstairs and out to the car, then driving me back here, to his house…

The pulsing pressure between my legs grows stronger. Pressure rolls over my clit, and I suddenly realize this is not a dream.

My eyes fly open, and I gasp when they lock with venomous green.

"*Morning*," Nero murmurs languidly.

I watch his hand between my legs stroke over my aching clit, his shoulder and arm muscles rippling. Then he sinks a finger into me, making me whimper softly.

"*Nero*…" I coo softly. My hands go to his bare torso, my fingers sliding over his chiseled abs and chest, scratching him lightly with my nails as I moan.

His finger pushes into me, stroking against my g-spot as my legs spread on their own accord.

"*Good morning*..." I gasp breathlessly, my hips rolling.

His lips brush mine, and for a second, I'm almost thrown by how…*normal* this is. Just regular-person morning playtime.

No chases through the dark. No brutality. No hands around my throat. No utter and breathless submission.

It’s not like I’m tired of all that, not one bit. I don't want a break from our usual games. It’s just that this is so *different*. I find myself melting against him as he kisses me slowly, his tongue swirling with mine, tasting and stroking. His fingers tease over my clit before sinking back into my slick heat.

His bulging hard cock throbs against my thighs, and I moan into his kiss as I reach down to wrap my small hand around him.

God. Damn, he's big—so thick that my fingers don’t touch as they curl around him. I stroke him slowly, feeling him swell against my thighs as he growls into my mouth. Stickiness is already leaking from his swollen head onto my skin as I start to stroke him faster. I bring my other hand down, wrapping both of them around him, stacked on top of each other. There’s *still* more of him poking out the top and grinding against my skin.

I want him. All of him.

Now.

It's like Nero has read my thoughts. I whimper into his kiss as he lifts my leg. I pull his bulging head to my pussy, trembling when I feel the swollen heat of him drag up and down my lips. His hand tangles in my platinum locks as he starts to push into me—

There’s a loud, sharp knock at the bedroom door.

I flinch, jolting as he hisses under his breath and turns to glance over his shoulder in the direction of the interruption.

“*What*?!” he snarls.

“Morning!”

He groans. So do I, cringing when I hear Gabby’s voice.

“Nero, does your little sleepover friend want to have breakfast?”

“*Jesus,* Gabby,” he grunts. “Go away!”

He turns back to me and starts to push his dick into me again.

“Is that a yes to breakfast?”

I bite back a giggle. He scowls as he glances over his shoulder again.

“*No*! Now fuck *off*, Gabby!”

“Can she answer for herself, please?”

“I’m okay!” I call out. “Thanks, though!”

“Hey, girl!” she calls through the door.

Nero groans, dropping his head to the pillow.

“Hey, Gabriella,” I giggle back.

“Oh, you can call me Gabby,” she says.

“And *you* can have this conversation,” Nero growls into my ear, “when I’m not in the middle of *fucking* you.”

“I—I don't need breakfast!” I call out. “Thanks, though.”

“Don’t forget, girl,” Gabby hollers. “Too hot to have your time wasted. ’K, *byyeee*.”

After we hear her walk away, Nero turns back to me, his brow furrowing.

“The fuck does *that* mean,” he mutters.

I smile, shaking my head. “Nothing.”

“Good. Now spread your legs so I can fuck you awake properly.”

I find myself grinning as his previous gentle veneer shatters, revealing the usual feral Nero underneath. He grabs my thigh,

lifting my leg and making me gasp as he slaps my clit with his heavy cock.

“We should go out some time.”

He tenses, his eyes dragging up to mine.

“What?”

“Like, *out*-out.” I suck my lip between my teeth as I look at him. “You know, like…”

“A date,” he grunts.

“Yes?”

“Hard pass.”

He sinks his thick head into me, sending waves of pleasure through my core.

“*Wait.*”

Nero glowers at me as I press my hands to his chest, holding him back.

“I’m serious,” I murmur.

He frowns. “If your plan is to blackmail me into taking you out on a date by withholding pussy, it won’t end well for you.”

My face flushes. “Oh? Why?”

“Because I’ll just fuck you anyway.”

Aaaand I’m wet. I mean, I was already. But the second he says that, the floodgates open.

And Nero *definitely* feels it.

He pounces, overpowering me and rolling me onto my back. My pulse thuds as he pins my wrists above my head and lets his piercing green eyes do the same to the rest of me.

“Interesting,” he murmurs. “I think you *like* that idea.”

“I—” Words fail me as I squirm against him. I glance down between us, my core tightening when I see his huge dick bobbing right above my pussy.

Nero growls quietly as he lowers his hips, using only them to drag his obscenely big dick over my pussy. The head glides across my clit, making me whimper as he rolls his hips again.

He lets his heavy cock drag lower, spreading my lips and gliding the head up and down over my opening as my entire body trembles and melts for him.

“Okay!” I blurt. “No withholding sex for a date!”

He chuckles darkly.

“But…” I swallow. “How about a trade?”

Nero arches a brow. “Of?”

“Information. There are things I don’t know about you,” I shrug. “And I'd like to.”

He looks mildly amused as he looks down into my eyes.

“Well, there are things *I* don’t know about *you*.”

My brow quirks up skeptically. “Really? I thought you’d pried into all my secrets.”

His lips curl at the corners. “There’s always room for improvement.”

“Well, the point—” I gasp sharply, swallowing a whimper as his fat cock teases back up over my clit again. “The *point* is—okay, stop. I can’t have this conversation while you’re doing that.”

”Make me.”

I glare at him. He grins.

“The point *is*,” I choke out, “I want to know more about you.”

Nero actually does stop then.

“Why?” he asks, sounding genuinely confused.

I sigh heavily. “I just *do*, okay? Like…” I desperately try and think of an example as he keeps teasing my clit with his cock. “Like…” I nod my chin at the tattoo that snakes over his forearm, curling down over the back of his hand.

“What’s that tattoo of? Are those dates? Coordinates?”

“Yes and yes.”

I roll my eyes. “*Of*?”

When Nero frowns I squeeze my thighs shut, smirking. Then I whimper as he shoves one hand down between us and starts to physically pry my legs apart.

“Tell me and I’ll let you,” I blurt.

“Or I don’t and do it anyway.”

I sigh, looking up at him with puppy-dog eyes. “*Please*?”

Nero groans, rolling his eyes. “*Fine*, Jesus.” He glances at the ink. “It’s Krakatoa.”

My brows knit. “The volcano? Why do you have that tattooed on your arm?”

He pauses for a moment, eyeing me like he’s trying to decide if he’s going to humor me or flip me over and fuck me with…or without…my consent.

I mean, *he’s got it*, but, you know.

“When Krakatoa went off in Sumatra in 1883, the explosion was three hundred and ten decibels,” he says. “It was, and still is, the loudest sound ever recorded in human history, equal to a two-hundred-megaton bomb.”

Woah.

“The sound wave went around the Earth three times”, he continues. “People heard it three thousand miles away, and people *forty* miles away had ruptured eardrums.”

Holy. Shit.

“Why do you have it tattooed on you?”

He shrugs. “It’s inspirational to me.”

I grin. “Because it caused mayhem and destruction?”

“Maybe,” he grins back. “Or because it was the loudest fucking thing on Earth.” He eyes lock with mine. “Maybe I just like to be heard.”

He pushes his knee between my legs and roughly shoves them apart. He nudges his cock against my lips and start to push his still-hard cock into me.

“Hang on—”

“*Nope*,” he murmurs, smiling darkly. “You got your question.”

“I have a second one. Shall I stop you *now*, or later?”

He rolls his eyes dramatically as he sits back on his haunches, glaring at me.

“*Fine*. Fuck,” he mutters. I grin impishly and pull my knees up to my chest.

“How do you and Kir know each other?”

He tenses, his eyes darkening.

“Careful, princess,” he murmurs.

I cock my head to the side, folding my arms over my bare chest, which I realize is probably more humorous-looking than tough.

He eyes me coolly. “Why are you asking me this?”

I feel my throat work.

“*Milena*—”

“I saw you the other night,” I blurt.

He frowns. “When?”

“When I didn’t show up at Greymoor that first night you told me to come back.” I pause. “I… I *did*. Show up, I mean. I was just…”

“Early,” Nero mutters, his eyes locked on me. “What exactly did you hear.“

I look down at my hands, instantly regretting bringing this up and cursing myself for being such an idiot.

“What did you *hear*, princess,” he murmurs quietly.

“Enough.”

His mouth twists. “And what did you see.”

“*A lot*,” I whisper hoarsely.

The bedroom goes silent. I stare at his chest, unable to look him in the eye. Then he cups my chin, lifting it until my eyes trail up his face to his gaze.

“Four years ago, my mother and father were killed,” he says flatly. “*Executed*.”

My whole body stiffens. My pulse is suddenly roaring in my ears, and it feels like my throat is squeezing in on itself.

My family did that, a voice screams in my head.

“I was attacked that night, too” he grits out. “They were mercenaries. I never found out who hired them. I don’t know if *they* even knew. It’s not like we had a shortage of enemies.”

A horrible, twisting sensation wrenches at my heart as my stomach drops.

Nero, or Laz.

Both are mafia. Both have, and had, plenty of enemies. I looked into it after that day at the bookstore with Laz: his family was embroiled in a bloody conflict with a Bulgarian mafia family at the time that my uncle and the De Lucas were briefly at war.

Was it Nero I was with that night, who sent me running as he was getting shot at by my uncle's hired guns? Or was it Laz Kislev, dodging a hail of Bulgarian mafia gunfire as he told me to leave via the back door and not look back?

Either way, Nero still doesn’t know that it was *my damn family* who killed his. And right now, that hurts much worse than any bruise or cut.

“The night of the attack, they found my parents at a restaurant my father owned.”

His voice is flat; hardened. His face is steely and tense as he looks though me.

“They raped my mother, and made my father watch before killing them both.”

I start to cry before I realize it’s happening. Tears flood down my face as I bury my head against his chest.

I know I didn't pull any triggers that night. I didn't aid or abet the murderers in any way. But not telling him what I know feels just as awful.

“The two men you saw me with that night, in the side yard at Greymoor…” His arms wrap around me. “They were the two men that night that held my father down.” He shakes his head. “Do *not* feel bad for them.”

I don’t.

I feel bad for *him*.

Horrible.

A tremor ripples through my body, and I feel Nero’s arms tighten around me. Then he slowly pulls back, reaching for my chin and lifting my face to his again. He frowns as he brushes the tears from my cheeks, and our eyes lock. “You never need to be scared of me, baby. Not ever.”

His mouth descends to mine, lips molding to my own. It’s a soft kiss at first, then grows more heated and passionate. My legs widen, and I kiss him with even more hunger as I wrap them around his waist.

“*Wait*,” he murmurs.

I giggle quietly into his lips. “Oh, *you’re* stopping *me* now?”

He smirks. “Only to ask you what you’re doing tomorrow night.”

Heat floods my cheeks. Then I wince.

“Shit. I have late rehearsal.”

“The night after, then,” he grunts. “I want to take you out.”

I bite my lip as his green eyes ensnare me. “What’s the catch?”

“How about you just shut up and take the win, princess,” he murmurs.

Then I’m moaning deeply as he sinks his cock into me, pushing deep as his mouth crushes to mine.

* * *

It’s 5 a.m. the next day when Dominic gives me a ride back to my house. I slip in through the front door after a quick hello to the guards on duty. I’m halfway up the stairs when I hear throat being cleared behind me.

“You’re home early,” Papa says.

I tense, wincing.

“Or late,” he chuckles.

My face is burning as I slowly turn to face him.

“Morning, Papa.”

He smiles at me. “Come,” he beckons. “Have coffee with me.”

I smile weakly, nodding as I follow him through the house into the kitchen. He pours me a cup, tipping in a splash of milk, no sugar, just how I like it.

He hands it to me and sits at the breakfast nook by the window, patting the table invitingly. I sit across from him and we sip our coffees, steam curling around our noses.

“Sorry I didn't come home last night. It got late, so I crashed at Evelina’s house.”

A slight smirk dances across Papa’s handsome face.

“Milena… I was born, but it wasn’t yesterday.” He nods his chin at me. “Who’s the boy?”

My pulse skips.

“Papa—”

"You're not in trouble," he chuckles. "You're a grown woman, and your personal life is your own business. I'm asking because I'm your father and I care about you. I want to make sure you're not hurt." He clears his throat. "Also, I worry when you're out all night."

"Sorry," I mumble.

He shakes his head. "That's all right, *solnyshka*." He looks at me pointedly, still smirking slightly. "So… Who is he?"

I drop my eyes to my coffee mug. "You won't like it," I mutter.

He makes a face. "Christ, it wasn't *Leo*, was it?"

My nose wrinkles. "Uh, *no*. Definitely not."

"How did that go, by the way?" he frowns. "Your sit-down with him."

Visions of blood tsunamis and sticky red fingers wrapped around my throat slam into me. My insides coil, replaying the all-consuming madness of piercing green eyes pinning me to the dirty table as a thick cock split me open.

"Just *lovely*," I say flatly. "Leo got drunk and tried to put his hands on me."

Papa's face turns dark. Viciousness flickers in his eyes as his strong jaw clenches and his tattooed fingers tighten around the coffee mug in front of him.

"*Did he*, now," he hisses quietly. "Then he's a dead man, Milena."

I smile wryly.

"It's fine, Papa. I mean, it *wasn't*, but I shoved him away and ran out of the bar."

He dips his chin, smiling softly. "That's my girl."

We sip our coffee in silence for a moment before Papa clears his throat again.

"Yes, Papa?"

"Who were you *really* with last night, *solnyshka*."

I swallow tightly. "I thought I was a grown woman. That my personal life was my own business."

"Well, it is," he says in a steady tone. "Except on nights when you go out with Leo Debolsky and then he vanishes without a trace."

I've never been one to lie to my father. We're too close for that: we've always been there for each other, and he respects me as much as I respect him.

"*Milena*…"

I take a slow breath before I drop my eyes and lift the coffee mug to my lips.

"Nero De Luca."

Papa is silent, his face a mask as I slowly take a sip of my coffee.

Then another. And another.

Finally, he nods. "*Interesting*," he murmurs. "Very interesting."

My cheeks warm and my lips curl despite my best efforts. "It's…"

Papa chuckles quietly. "I *see*. I take it from your smile that this is a good thing?"

I glance up at him sheepishly and nod. Papa sighs.

"Well, know this: if he treats you poorly, if he harms you in any way, I'll fucking cut his head off."

He doesn't always give me all the gory details, but nothing about my father's life is hidden from me. So when he says that?

I know he means it. Literally.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," I flush, smiling like a goofball.

"For his sake," Papa sighs, "I hope it's not." His brow furrows. "Did he…*help*…last night, concerning the problem with Leo?"

I nod. Papa's mouth purses.

"Did anyone *see* Nero—more importantly, did anyone see you *with* Nero when he was…*helping* with this problem?"

I shake my head firmly. "No. Why?"

"Leo Debolsky was declared missing by his father this morning when he didn't come home last night. His cell phone was traced to a sewer drain near the Metropolitan Museum."

"Oh," I say quietly.

"Indeed," Papa growls, peering at me. "Milena… Will we be seeing Leo again?"

I swallow and slowly shake my head. "I don't think so, Papa," I whisper. My fingers twist together as I look at him. "Is that going to be a problem with Vladimir? He knows I was meeting with Leo—"

"Vladimir Debolsky is not a stupid man, Milena," Papa grunts. "I would assume he's well aware of his son's demons, not to mention his ability to make enemies." He clears his throat again. "From what I know about Mr. De Luca," he grunts, "can I assume Leo won't be *popping up* anytime soon for someone to find?"

I tremble a little as I hug my arms. "I…don't think so."

Papa nods. "Good. Let's agree to move on and never speak of this again."

I smile weakly at him. "Let's do that."

Papa smiles as he picks up his coffee mug and taps it against mine. He takes a sip, turning to look out the window into the back garden as he exhales slowly.

"*De Luca*," he murmurs, letting the name roll over his tongue as if to see how it tastes. "Interesting."

I smile wryly. "You'd have preferred it to be a Russian guy."

Papa chuckles, shaking his head. "What I *prefer* is that my daughter is happy, safe, and respected." He eyes me. "If he slips up with *any* of those things, even once, the smallest bit, you will tell me, please."

I grin. "So that you can carve him into little pieces, stuff him into an oil drum, and roll him off the back of a boat somewhere down-current of the city?"

He smirks. "Who said anything about *little* pieces?"

"*Papa*—"

He chuckles, reaching over to take my hand. "In all seriousness, I *did* always imagine you ending up with a Russian." He smiles. "Funny—Dmitriy Kislev has tiptoed around the subject of his son Laz and you on more than a few occasions."

A shiver tickles down my spine.

"Has he?"

Papa nods. "He has. But as I've always said, my daughter is not a bargaining chip."

I grin as I squeeze his hand. "Thank you," I say quietly.

"An Italian…" he muses, smiling to himself, shaking his head. "Well, who knows. Maybe Nero will submit to one of those DNA tests and discover he's got some Russian in him after all."

"Problem solved," I laugh. Then I glance at the time and wince.

"Shoot, I need to get to work."

I stand and walk over to him, throwing my arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. As I turn to go, a thought hits me. I turn

back to him, frowning.

“Papa…You and Kir are friends, right?”

He nods slowly. “We’re friend*ly*. I’m not sure Kir *has* friends, to be honest. But I trust and respect him, and I think he feels the same about me. Why?”

“Do you know why he and *Nero* might be friendly?”

Something flickers across his face that’s gone as quickly as it came.

“What does Nero say?”

“He…doesn’t.”

Papa smiles. “I don’t know, *solnyshka*. Maybe they do business together.”

I nod slowly, the wheels in my head turning.

Then I go upstairs to get ready for work.

27

MILENA

I DON'T GET stage fright.

Not when I perform, not at auditions. Oh, I sometimes get butterflies right before the curtain rises. But it's the fun kind of excitement, a thrill teasing through your body that energizes and excites, not worries. So the nervous feeling I get as I hold different dresses against myself in the mirror is new to me.

I'm *fretting* about it all: the dress, my hair, if my nails are the right shade *if* I go with the blue dress I'm leaning toward instead of the white one.

The nick on my calf from shaving. The fact that I *want* to wear the freaking gorgeous shoes that Evie got me for my last birthday, but I only ever wear them at home with close friends since they're open-toed and show off…ugh…my mangled dancer's feet.

I scowl at myself in the mirror.

Get a fucking grip.

I don't know where these fucking nerves are coming from. It's not like this is a first date. I mean, we're *slightly* past that. We must have had sex about two hundred times, and he's chased me through the dark on dozens of occasions.

We've explored some *super* dark kinks together. So why the *fuck* am I nervous?

Then I catch my reflection in the glass, and the truth comes bubbling out.

This *is* a first date. Not in the sense that we are strangers looking to see if we have anything in common, but it's the first time we're going out as an *us*.

In public. To a restaurant. Where we'll eat food, have some drinks, and smile politely. I won't be screaming and whimpering as he chases me through the shadows and then rails the shit out of me.

I mean, that's *going* to be happening tonight. Just, you know…

Not in the middle of dinner.

With another shaky breath, I turn and let my eyes settle on a book across the room. I walk over and pluck it from the shelf, my pulse thudding a little harder as I sit on the edge of my bed and run my fingers over the worn leather cover.

It's a first edition of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Really.

Papa found it for me for my birthday three years ago. Not, of course, that he knew its deeper significance, or about my pen pal and everything that came from that. But he did know it was a favorite book that helped me after mom died, and knew that I collected older editions of it.

So for my nineteenth birthday, he got me a first edition of the book, in German.

It's one of my most treasured possessions. It's also where I now keep the letters that my pen pal wrote me all those years ago.

Some of them, tragically, have been lost. But most of them are still here, tucked into the pages of the book that brought us together. Not the *exact* copy, obviously. But I feel this first edition does these notes justice as a resting place.

I open to where two of the notes are nestled between the pages. I don't do this that often, but sometimes, if I'm stressed or worried, reading them can help.

I think tonight warrants a bit of a read.

I smile as I unfold the first one.

> Hey,
> Okay, first, I'm sorry you didn't get the part for your graduation performance. That sucks. I won't insult you by minimizing or downplaying it. I know you'd have made a killer Coppelia.
> And yes, we both know I've never seen a single ballet, and that I know fuck-all about the role. But I do know YOU, and I know you'd have nailed it. I've obviously never seen you dance. But I know you're good. Fan-fucking-tastic, actually.
> Still...I'm sorry.
> But I also want to say something. I probably would've punched someone for telling me this when I was your age, but...
> It doesn't matter.
> Not in an obnoxious, nihilistic, "nothing matters" edgy emo way. More like... You're a speck. I'm a speck. Our entire lives are a blip inside a blip. The Earth doesn't give a shit if you get that promotion, or that role, or that date.
> That might sound pretty bleak. But try to think of it as a positive.
> I used to lose my SHIT when things went bad. Like, I went full-on psycho. But now, I just think about things like the sun being the size of 1.3 million –fucking million– Earths. Tectonic plate shifts. Erosion. Hurricanes. Floods.
> No matter what happens to you or me, the Earth will keep spinning through space. To me, that's comforting. Not nihilistic. Freeing. I think about how one day, we'll all just be bones—or nothing. And then I breathe.
> I'm sorry you lost out on that role, really. But I know you're going to be fine.
>
> Be heard,
> -Me

I grin as I reread it. It's not just our faces we kept a secret from each other. We literally never exchanged names. It came up after probably the fourth letter. I asked if he wanted to use real names, or fake ones.

He said why bother with names at all—it was only us reading the letters. We knew who they were written to, and who they were from.

Honestly, he had a point.

So we'd always open with "Hey" or "Hey, friend", and end with just "-Me."

I scan the letter again, then move on to the next. They're pretty much in order within the book, so when I do occasionally pick up our exchange, I can mostly follow along, even though *my* letters to him are, well, with him.

Or thrown away. Or lost to time.

Hey,
Whoa. That was some Level 99 rage-dump in your last note.
Fucking love it. But remind me never to get on your bad side. I almost feel bad for whoever did get that role.
Again, though, don't let it make you doubt yourself. You're a fucking pro now. Like, you've literally just signed a contract with a professional ballet company. Let that sink in, let it fuel you, and think how fucking cool five-year-old you would think today-you is. Seriously, huge congratulations, that's awesome.
Oh, and you said something a few notes back that I never replied to...about how maybe the pain is the point. That you don't just want a flawless performance, you want the falls, and the bruises. The breathless ache in your lungs when you know you gave everything, and it still wasn't enough.
I haven't stopped thinking about that. It's a little fucked up, but I get it, probably more than I should.
You also said I sound like someone who likes to chase after things.
...You're righter there than you know, but that might be a conversation for another time. Or never.
Anyway, don't let the falls get to you. Think of the sun blowing up. Or a hurricane. Or a volcano destroying a city, or whatever.
Ugh, I really do sound like a nihilistic edge lord.

Be heard,
-Me

I smile.

I used to *love* going to the NYPL and looking for our book to see if he'd responded to my last note yet. He always knew just what to say.

Whoever he was.

I put the book down for a second, then walk over to where I've draped the blue and the white dresses over a chair.

White it is.

I slip it on, checking myself in the mirror before I turn and head back to the bed.

Time for one more note, then I should leave.

Hey,
So, speaking of natural disasters (thanks for rambling on about tsunamis. New fucking fear unlocked...), I read something the other day about how the Krakatoa eruption in 1883 was so loud, people heard it for 3,000 miles. Like, literal continents and oceans away. It ruptured eardrums and shook the entire PLANET. The whole sky world-wide went dark. They say it was over 300 decibels, too, which is literally the loudest sound in human history.

Anyway, that's your unsolicited science fact of the week. You're welcome.
Meanwhile, I've been thinking about getting some more tattoos. My dad's not big on the idea of anything super visible or out there, since one day, I'll be taking his place leading the family. But I think a tattoo that has to do with Krakatoa, maybe on a forearm or even my hand, would be cool as fuck. Thoughts?

Be heard,
-Me

I don't read it over a second or third time. All I can do is stare at the last "-Me" like the letters might burst into flames.

What.

The.

Fuck.

"I think a tattoo that has to do with Krakatoa, maybe on a forearm or even my hand, would be cool as fuck."

My pulse ticks slowly through my veins like syrup. My head spins, my eyes trying to focus on the words as a memory of just yesterday morning filters in through the fog.

"Why do you have that tattooed on your arm?"

"It's inspirational to me."

"Mayhem and destruction?"

"Maybe. Or because it was the loudest fucking thing on Earth. Maybe I just like to be heard."

Be heard.

It all hits at once, a wave slamming into me and knocking the air from my lungs.

For years, I never knew who my pen pal was, even though we told each other everything, up to and including our deepest, darkest thoughts and fantasies.

Kinks. Desires. *Needs*.

We met, just once, masked, and he chased me through the shadows, pulled me to the ground, and took every part of me.

Then bullets shattered the night, and scattered whoever he was to the winds.

And for the last few weeks, I've been debating if it was Laz, or Nero.

They're both the right age. They've both got dark hair and piercing green eyes. They both come from mafia families.

It could have been either of them.

There was only one I wanted it to be, though. And I just got my wish.

It's him.

My pen pal, and the man from that night…

Is *Nero*.

The sheer force of the smile that spreads across my face sends me reeling. I'm grinning so hard it fucking *hurts*, my heart pounding in my chest as I whirl, giddy with excitement. Bursting with a thousand questions.

Buzzing with the need to look him dead in the eye and tell him everything.

That I'm me.

That we've picked up where we left off four years ago.

My pulse skips.

...That I love him.

I could say it's silly. I could roll my eyes and tell myself to stop being ridiculous. But it's not a sudden thought. It's one that's been building for some time, growing, even if I've been trying to ignore it for weeks.

I'm not doing that anymore.

My very skin is tingling as I walk in a daze toward the vanity. My fingers shake as I open my jewelry box, and a soft smile teases my lips as I pull out the pendant: a delicate silver chain with a single diamond hanging from it.

Well, not a pendant.

An earring.

I had this made three years ago from the single Louis Monte Noir diamond earring that remained in my possession after that night with him.

With *Nero*.

When the bullets flew, I managed to lose one—or maybe I lost it in our chase earlier in the evening. Either way, I only made it home with one. And months later, I had that remaining one turned into this pendant.

A soft smile curls the corners of my lips as I bring it to my neck. I don't wear this often, but tonight it feels appropriate.

I'm still not sure what to think, just how I feel about all this: excited but grounded. Nervous but sure. Spinning out of control but headed right for him.

I've collected a few copies of *Werther* over the years. My most prized one is the first edition from my father, where I keep the notes. But the first runner up is another first edition.

I found this one in a vintage bookstore in London two years ago. It's not in *quite* as good shape as Papa's, but it's still a stunning copy of a book I treasure dearly.

And I know what I'm doing with it tonight.

I sit at my desk and open the book with shaking hands. I have to breathe deeply so that my hand doesn't tremble holding the pen. Then, with a grin practically splitting my face, I scrawl the words across the inside cover, then close it.

My pulse thuds. My skin tingles as I glance at the clock.

It's time.

Time to finally meet, face to face. Without words, years, or masks between us.

And I can't fucking wait.

28

NERO

I EXHALE HEAVILY.

If you were spying on me, it might appear from my fidgeting, pacing, and frequent glances at myself in the mirror that I was nervous. *Me*.

But it's not nerves that have me pacing, clenching my hands and grinding my teeth.

It's excitement.

Because tonight, I'm making it real. When I meet Milena for dinner in about forty minutes at Oolong, midtown's newest two Michelin star restaurant, I'm breaking down the last wall between us.

Tonight, the truth comes out, all of it.

There's no stopping the grin that spreads over my face as I catch my eye in the mirror.

Hey.

It's "Me".

And *I know who you are*, Milena.

I exhale again, fixing my tie before I walk over to the painting hanging on the opposite side of my room, above the couch. It swings out on hidden hinges, and I thumb open the biometric lock to the safe behind it. I slide aside my passport, a few rolls of hundreds and a .45 magazine, then pull out the little black velvet jewelry box.

No, it's not a fucking ring. Jesus.

Not *yet*, anyway.

But I know she's going to love it.

I grin as I pop the box open, the light glinting off the diamond inside.

Perfect.

I shut the box and slip it into my jacket pocket. Then I smile as I reach back into the safe and pull out my most prized possession.

Someday, maybe, the New York Public Library is going to fine me thousands of dollars for having this out for so long, especially given that it's a rare book.

But they'll have to catch me first.

I sit on the couch, the velvet box safely in my pocket as I trace a finger over the worn leather cover.

I've always enjoyed *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

At first, it was just another stupid book assigned by a teacher with a hard-on for esoteric 18th century European literature. But for some reason, this book hooked me. I loved the prose, even though I realized I was reading it in English, and who knows what gets lost in translation, especially from fucking German. But I also know I'm probably never *learning* German, so, it is what it is.

I liked the way the whole book was written via letters.

But what I loved the most is that one day, it brought me to her.

For a long time, she was just that: "her".

My correspondent. My pen pal. My fellow Goethe fan with a fiery temper, sharp wit, clever mind, and something captivating about her thoughts.

We wrote back and forth, tucking the notes between the pages of the very book I'm holding in my hands. We talked about nothing and everything. And slowly, we began to dig deeper.

Hauled out demons from our respective closets.

Nightmares and dreams. Fears and aspirations.

Cravings and desires.

And then one day, we decided to move from the page to real life. We discussed what we wanted and made a plan: we'd wear masks, and we'd explore the dark side she'd always wanted to dip her toes into.

We met. And on one mad, reckless evening, I found an equal to my darkness I never thought I would.

Then, bullets shattered everything.

When the violence started, I sent her running to keep her safe. I took a bullet in the arm, but I managed to eliminate the four motherfuckers somebody had sent to kill me. I have no idea how they managed to find me: I later ended up paying an ultra-high-end Chinese hacker to reverse engineer my phone to see if it'd been tracked. But even he couldn't solve the mystery.

That was just the start of it.

An hour later, after I'd fought my way out of the warehouse space and linked up with a wounded Dom, I learned about my parents.

They'd been ambushed in a restaurant my father owned: a place he'd purposefully emptied for the night so he could have a romantic evening with my mother.

Five motherfuckers with guns—mercenaries, I learned later—barged in on them. They beat my father. They made him watch while they did unspeakable things to my mother.

Then they executed them both.

After that night, I broke a little. Gabby was safe, thank God, but everything else was gone.

My parents. My family as I knew it.

Her.

I knew that night didn't *have* to be the end of it. I could have easily found her again.

But sometimes, the way back is blocked and the wounds are so deep that you have to leave it all behind.

So that's why after I made one last trip to the library and found our book, I took it with me and locked that particular door behind me.

After that, I lost a part of myself. It took a while, but after the dust settled, and I was crowned king, and I made sure Gabby was safe and taken care of, I found myself with a gun to my head in the dead of night.

That's the night Kir found me.

"Life is pain."

My eyes squeeze shut. I don't want to hear his words. He's already said so much in the three minutes he's been here that I don't know how to process it.

How to feel about it.

Where to go from here.

Actually, I already know that last one.

The metal presses to my temple. My finger teases the trigger.

"And sometimes," he continues, "you can't escape it."

He stops right in front of me, his dark eyes fixed on mine.

"But you don't always have to play by life's rules."

He reaches for the gun. I tense, gripping it harder.

"I'll give it back," he says quietly. "I promise."

I don't know why I believe him, but I do. I watch numbly as he takes the revolver from my hands, opens the cylinder, and taps all six bullets out into his palm.

His eyes slide back to mine.

"You still get to play," he murmurs. "You still get a chance to square off with death. But not with bullshit odds."

He holds up a single bullet, then slips it into the cylinder. He snaps it shut and spins it violently.

"You get one bullet, Nero," he growls. "Just one."

The gun is in my hand again. My palm is slick as I look away from Kir, toward the framed photo of my parents as well as the book I stole from the library, and the memories of her that come with it.

I press the barrel to my temple. My eyes close as I draw back the hammer.

"Life is pain, Nero," Kir murmurs. "Sometimes you can't escape it—"

It happens so fast I don't have time to second-guess myself.

The neurons in my brain connect. The synapses fire. My finger squeezes the trigger.

CLICK.

My breath leaves my body in a rushing, wooshing sound as the revolver dry-fires against my head.

Kir's hand wraps around the barrel, removing it gently from my grip.

"But other times," he says. "You CAN."

I run my fingers over the copy of *Werther* again, and a small smile creeps over my lips. I reach inside my pocket and feel the box, nodding.

It's time.

Time to find my way again. To come clean.

To tell her everything.

…But especially, that I love her.

I exhale once more before I stand and tuck the book back into the safe, close and lock it, and swing the picture back into place.

I'm heading for the door when there's a knock.

"Nero."

I frown when I open the door and see Dom standing there, brow furrowed.

"You going somewhere?"

"Yep."

He clears his throat. “You planning on telling me *where*?”

“Mmm…nope.”

He grins, rolling his eyes. “Well, before you go… This came for you.”

I frown when he hands me a small, padded mailing envelope; sealed, no postage.

“It came via courier.” Dom answers my unspoken question. “Don't worry, I had it scanned by security for any explosives residue.”

I’d joke that this is overkill, but… Welcome to my world.

After Dom heads on his way, I close the door and tear open the package.

The little thumb drive I find inside is curious enough.

…The Post-it note stuck to it reading “play me” is even weirder.

I grab my laptop, sit on the couch, and slip in the thumb drive.

There’s only one file, a video. When I click it, I’m not sure what I’m watching at first. Then very quickly, it becomes apparent.

…and my whole reality shifts on its axis.

For a moment, I stare at what plays across the screen, frozen. My body goes numb. My eyes stab into the video, watching it as my hands start to twitch.

No.

It’s like watching the laws of physics break in front of you. Like you’re witnessing something not real, because it *can’t* be real. Because if it *is*, it destroys the foundations of everything you think you know.

Reality itself.

The video is brief, but I play it again.

And again.

And *again*.

My world cracks in half. My heart wrenches and twists. Violence and a cold, dark, churning madness begin to thunder inside me as my vision goes red.

Tonight, I was planning on breaking down the last wall between us.

I was planning to let the truth come out.

…Except it just did, on the screen in front of me.

Like a knife to the fucking back.

.

Okay. I'm going to say something I probably shouldn't. But I keep thinking about it, so fuck it, here it is:

Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we met? Like, for real, in the real world.

And to that end, I have a confession of my own to make: I don't mean "let's meet and have coffee and talk about Goethe."

I mean let's meet and do all the things we've talked about.

Like...the dark stuff.

Fucking hell, I can't believe I'm even writing this.

Here's the thing: like it or not, you've managed to become one of my closest friends. Maybe the closest one I've ever had.

I trust you. I've never MET you, but I trust you, and if there was ever one person I could work up the courage to try my fantasies out with...well, surprise: you're it.

But I'm also scared it'll ruin this. That seeing your face might make it all too real. Or that it will change things.

Is it the anonymity that allows me to be so open with you?

So tell me I'm crazy. Tell me I just took things too far. Better yet, burn this note and pretend I never said a thing.

Ugh.

-Me

29

MILENA

RURIK INSISTS on driving me himself. As if a dinner date with a man is grounds for an armed escort. Mind you, Rurik is basically *always* on war-time alert.

I suppose that makes him a pretty good head of security for Papa. It also makes for one fucking *morose* Uber driver, though.

He hates when I tease him about that.

"Five stars coming your way," I grin as we pull up the curb outside the ultra-chic Oolong, a Fujian Chinese-inspired two Michelin star restaurant, waving my phone.

Rurik turns and shoots me a baleful look from the front seat of the Range Rover.

"Although, if you're going to glare at me," I sigh, "it might go down to *four*—"

"Milena," he mutters quietly, eyes narrowing.

"Enough with the Uber jokes?"

He frowns. "I really think I should accompany you."

"Yeah, because nothing sets the mood for a romantic evening like a scary six-foot-four Russian guy with prison tats joining the party," I say dryly.

"Six foot *five*. And they're not *all* prison tattoos."

I smile at him and reach forward, laying a hand on his shoulder.

"Rurik, you know I love you. But tonight is about me and Nero, okay?"

He scowls. "Milena—"

"It's a *date*, Rurik. I'm not storming an enemy stronghold."

He turns away, reaching for the glove compartment. "I must insist, then, that you take this."

I snort when he turns back holding a gun.

"A *date*, Rurik," I sigh again. "And where exactly did you imagine I would be putting that, anyway?"

I gesture eloquently at the form-fitting, summery, knee-length white dress, high heels, and *tiny* clutch purse.

Rurik frowns again. Admittedly, it's his default look.

"Okay, maybe if I had huge boobs like the girls I see *you* going out with, I could hide it in my cleavage. But, unfortunately…" I reach up and cup my little handfuls. "I'm just not built—"

"We're not continuing this conversation," Rurik mutters, looking everywhere in the car *except* at my hands on my tits.

I smile and reach for the door handle. "Works for me." I pat his shoulder again. "I'm going to be fine, Rurik. But you know I appreciate the concern."

His brow furrows heavily. "I will wait right—"

"*No you will not*," I say firmly. "Go home. Enjoy your night." I grin at him. "Call up one of those girls with the big titties—"

"Keep your phone on, Milena," he grunts.

"*That*, I can do."

I pick up the wrapped present from the seat next to me and step out of the back of the Range Rover. A man in a suit who looks *much* more Italian mafia than Chinese hospitality opens the door, ushering me inside. The maître d' bows formally, smiling politely before escorting me to our table.

Woah.

The entire restaurant is empty.

Forty tables at one of the trendiest, most exclusive fine dining restaurants in New York, and it's *empty*.

…Except for one table near the back, by a window overlooking a little tea garden.

Nero stands as the maître d' brings me over, then pulls out my chair. I don't sit. I grin, slightly nervous all of a sudden.

"H-hi," I say quietly, my face flushed.

He just nods, his jaw steely. I almost want to laugh.

What, is he nervous too?

I place the present on the table and step toward him, wrapping my arms around his body in a warm hug.

His arms don't leave his sides, which only makes me smile even more.

He's seriously *nervous*.

For some reason, that makes me feel better.

I get up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, still smiling as I pull back.

"So did the health department find a problem, or did you book the whole place?"

He dips his chin, lifting a shoulder. "I wanted us to be alone."

I waggle my brows as we take our seats. "*Very* baller move, Mr. De Luca."

Nero's already got a glass of red wine sitting in front of him, half gone. It's truly adorable that Mr. Dominant and Cocky has a case of the nerves he doesn't know what to do with.

I chew on my lip, drinking him in, my pulse picking up.

I mean, the man is *gorgeous*. He's in a dark charcoal gray linen suit, rocking a very European style—crisp white dress shirt underneath, unbuttoned, no tie. The combo makes his tanned Mediterranean skin pop and his green eyes glimmer in the low candlelight.

He looks *incredible*. Extra broody, for sure, but freaking incredible.

My eyes drag over his chiseled jaw and cheekbones, his dark hair swept back from his face. The vein pulsing in his neck.

…The tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve and snaking over the back of his hand.

Krakatoa.

Be heard.

I fidget nervously for a moment before I exhale and put my hand on the wrapped present in front of me.

"I, uh…this might be dorky, but I got—"

"Is that new?"

His eyes pierce across the table, looking right at my chest. A smile creeps over my face as I finger the pendant.

“No, actually.” My smile widens. “I’ve had it for years. It was actually an earring that belonged to my mother. It’s a—”

“Louis Monte Noir diamond.”

I blink in surprise. He says it so cooly, like he already knew. My brow arches as the grin curls even wider on my face.

“*Yeah*, actually.” I laugh lightly. “What are you, a secret jewelry expert?”

He says nothing.

“So full of surprises, Mr. De Luca,” I grin, blushing.

I take a shaky breath and put my hand on the present.

It’s time.

I exhale and look up, my blue eyes igniting as they gaze into his green ones.

“I…like you,” I blurt. “Like, a lot. And I know that’s not necessarily what this *is*, or…” I try again, my heart pounding in my chest. “I mean, I know we never defined what this is between us. But I think this might help us do that.”

I tentatively push the wrapped book across the table.

Nero’s brow furrows. There’s a tightness in his mouth, and I suddenly realize he’s barely said a dozen words to me since I walked in. But he pulls the present to him, then hooks a finger under the edge of the wrapping paper.

“You can open it now.”

He barely nods as his hand jerks, ripping the paper off as he turns the book over in his hands.

His whole body stiffens. His shoulders clench under the linen of his suit, and I watch that vein in his neck start to pulse wildly. His eyes go steely and dark, and his jaw is so tense it almost vibrates.

He doesn’t say a word, but it’s clear he knows *exactly* what he’s holding in his hands. That alone has my pulse skyrocketing as warm excitement bubbles and dances inside of me.

“I think you should open it,” I say quietly. "I wrote something inside."

He opens the front cover, and his eyes land on the inscription:

I know it was you.

“I know it was you.”

The words rumble darkly from his lips as he reads the words aloud. His whole face is tight, his eyes stabbing into the page.

“I know it was you…” he says again, taking a slow, deep breath.

My own breath is still held. I’m still waiting for that “ah-ha!” moment where he looks up at me with a big smile and a burst of realization in his eyes. Where he sweeps aside the table, captures me in his arms, and seals his lips to mine. Where he tells me he always wanted it to be me, and then kisses me, and holds me forever.

But none of that happens.

He stays frozen, staring at the book in his hands. Jaw tight. Eyes steely.

“I…” I swallow nervously, beyond confused.

Torn.

Hurt.

“Nero, I—”

He stands abruptly from the table, drawing up to his full height. Finally—*finally*—his eyes meet mine again.

But they're hard. Unreadable. Cold.

What the fuck.

He slowly walks around the table toward me. I lift my chin, my heart racing, waiting for him to stop with this cold act and scoop me into his arms.

He slowly keeps walking, until he's right behind me. Then he pauses.

My heart hammers in my chest. My throat goes dry. I gasp quietly as his hand suddenly slides around my neck, wrapping around my throat from behind.

Oh God, he's going to kiss me.

Any second now, he's going to twist my hair in a fist in that way that drives me wild, turn my head, and kiss me until I can't breathe.

His hand tightens.

"I know it was you," he murmurs, quoting my words back at me.

I smile nervously. "Nero—"

Wait. Something's not right. His fingers tighten—not possessively, not in that way that I love.

Just hard.

Too hard.

I choke, my eyes bulging as his hand wraps around my throat like a vise. My body jerks, trying to stand. But his iron grip keeps me planted in the chair as his lips descend from behind to brush my ear.

"And *I know*," he snarls, sending an icy chill up my spine, "that it was *you*."

There's a sharp jab to my neck. I flinch, gasping in shock and ripping my eyes to the side…

…Just in time to see Nero pulling out the hypodermic.

Alarm bells explode in my head as his hand loosens its grip and drops from my throat. My body feels numb and sluggish, the candlelight of the room suddenly flickering manically. My head lolls as my vision swims, eyes vainly trying to focus on him as sheer terror swallows me.

"*What*…" I moan as the room goes dark.

"*Whyyyy*…."

The last thing I see is pure, venomous fury igniting in those sharp green eyes.

Then it all goes dark.

30

MILENA

AT FIRST, all I know is cold.

Darkness. Damp concrete. The smell of mildew and dank earth. Musty, unmoving air.

And the voices.

"Yes, Papa."

"I'm proud of you, *malyshka*. Doing what the family needs you to do."

"Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do."

I squeeze my eyes tighter shut, groan when I feel the dull, sluggish throb of my pulse, like it's just waking up.

I open my eyes, and vague, flickering light swims into my consciousness. Blueish.

A television.

Where am I.

Why am I so cold.

The questions come like sparks in the darkness, startling me and making me wince before I force my eyes a little wider open.

"It's all a means to an end."

The voices fade out. The hazy TV screen goes dark.

My throat works, desperately trying to swallow, but it's as if all the water has been wrung from my body. I feel papery and dry; flimsy and weak. I try again, but it's like trying to push ice cream across sand.

"Are you ready for tonight?"

What the fuck.

This time, my eyes snap open at the sound of my father's voice.

"*Papa*?" I croak.

But he's not here. Not really.

"Yes Papa, I'm ready."

A cold chill—colder even than the icy damp wrapped around me—tumbles down my back.

That was my voice.

Slowly, my eyes lift to the screen on the wall.

"You'll make sure Nero is at the spot you agreed on?"

It's a video—from a security camera, judging by the graininess. Papa and I are sitting on a bench, in the back garden of our house, facing away from the camera. I watch, my brows furrowed in confusion as on-screen Papa puts his arm around my shoulders and nods.

“Of course, Papa.”

“Excellent,” Papa growls. He turns, the camera picking up half his face as he smiles at the me on screen. “If that changes, let me know immediately.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“I’m proud of you, *malyshka*. Doing what the family needs you to do.”

“Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do. Besides, he means nothing to me. It’s all a means to an end.”

An uncanny horror twists in my chest. I know that’s me, just like I know that’s Papa. I know those are our voices.

But *I don’t remember this conversation*.

At all.

I’m not even sure what the “we” on screen are talking about.

A violent chill wrenches my body, pulling my attention from the TV. I’m lying on a cold, grungy cement floor. I’m still in the white dress that I chose for my date with Nero, and the chilly air assaults my exposed skin like so many claws. It’s not *freezing*, but it’s cold enough that the discomfort is beginning to pull me further out of the darkness.

When my eyes properly focus, pure terror slices into me.

What the fuck.

…I’m in a *cage*.

I’m in the middle of a heavy metal ring, maybe ten or twelve feet across. Thick metal bars rise up from the ring, curving toward a center point above me where they meet. They look welded together, like a big birdcage. A single light bulb hangs above the cage, casting bizarre shadows over me and the floor, like more bars.

My pulse thuds. My blood turns to ice as fear hollows me out from the inside.

What the fuck is happ—

It hits me like a slap in the face.

The restaurant.

The present.

The hand around my throat.

And I know it was YOU.

I flinch as I relive the feel of the needle jabbing into my neck, my hand jerking up to the spot. I recall the darkness closing in, the cold, venomous green of his eyes slicing into me as I sank into nothingness.

My pulse skips.

Oh God—It’s *Nero* who imprisoned me.

“Are you ready for tonight?”

“Yes Papa, I’m ready.”

The world has morphed into some horrible, fucked-up version of reality on repeat, and I’m a captive viewer who can’t stop it.

“You’ll make sure Nero is at the spot you agreed on?”

“Of course, Papa.”

The voices on the TV are ours, and yet, they’re not. Like it’s a deepfake, created from reality.

“Excellent. If that changes, let me know immediately.”

“Yes, Papa.”

The TV is mounted to a stone wall, a few feet outside the perimeter of the cage. But just the same, I groan, pushing myself onto unsteady bare feet, my lips curled into a snarl as I rush at the TV, as if I might smash through the bars to get to it.

What the fuck.

Before I even *reach* the side of the cage, I’m jerked back by the ankle. The ground slips out from under me as counter-momentum rips me off my feet and sends me slamming to the cold, hard cement.

“I’m proud of you, *malyshka*. Doing what the family needs you to do.”

“Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do. Besides, he means nothing to me. It’s all a means to an end.”

A wrecked sob chokes from my throat as I grab my knee, wincing. I groan, turning to glare over my shoulder, and my heart drops.

I’m not just caged.

I’m fucking *chained*.

There’s a manacle around my ankle, linked to a chain running across the floor to the far side of the cage, where it’s padlocked to two of the bars. Next to that, inside the cage, is a cot, a jug of water, and…oh God…a *bucket* with a roll of toilet paper beside it.

My entire soul deflates and my body goes limp as my haggard eyes take in the horror scene around me.

“Are you ready for tonight?”

A sob wrenches from my chest as I whirl, my eyes going blurry as I watch the scene unfold yet again on the TV.

“Yes Papa, I’m ready.”

“You’ll make sure Nero is at the spot you agreed on?”

“Of course, Papa.”

“Are you enjoying the show?”

I shriek, whirling fast and wincing when my cut knee scrapes against the ground.

Then the floor drops out from underneath me.

Nero is standing in the shadows just outside the ring of light from the overhead bulb. I can only make out his vague silhouette.

And his violent green eyes.

Slowly he steps into the light, and my blood chills.

He’s still in the suit he wore to the restaurant. Still looking *unreasonably* gorgeous.

But he’s changed. Not physically, but when I look at him, I know without a doubt that I’m not looking at the same Nero who I knew before I walked into that restaurant.

“*What’s happening?*” I choke, my chest heaving with my panicky breath.

“I asked you a question, Milena.”

There’s no emotion in his voice. No joy. No anger. *Nothing*. And he looks at me the same way.

Just…blank.

“What is this?” I whisper, wrapping my arms around myself, rubbing my bare, freezing arms.

“It's a cage,” he growls quietly.

“But why am I *in it*?!” I scream.

Nero says nothing. He just watches me, his head tipped slightly to the side.

“Maybe you should keep watching the movie. It’s a *classic* tonight.”

He nods past me to the TV, where the hellish loop has already started again.

“Are you ready for tonight?”

“Yes Papa, I’m ready.”

“That’s not me,” I snap, shaking my head. I jab an accusing finger at the screen. “That is *not* me!”

“Well then she’s the spitting fucking image of you,” he grunts.

I stammer, my brow furrowing, fear surging inside me.

“N-no, I mean…I mean it’s *me*, I just…” I shiver. “I didn’t say those things.”

“Really. Sure sounds like you.”

Icy shards sink into my heart as his impassive, uncaring gaze lands on me.

“*Nero*,” I choke. “Get me out of here. *Please*—”

“Have you ever even actually *read* Goethe?”

I stare at him, dumbfounded. “*What*?”

“*The Sorrows of Young Werther*,” he growls. “Have you even fucking read it.”

“Of course I have!” I plead. “Like thirty fucking times!”

“M-hmm.”

“Nero!”

I shuffle to the bars nearest to him, grab hold of them and press my face between them. “What the *fuck* is going—”

“Four years ago…”

He steps a little more into the light, stalking slowly toward me, his eyes ripping me in two.

“My parents were taken from me. They ambushed them. Raped my mother, made my father watch. Then executed them.” His eyes pull to cold, green slits. “Gabriella was supposed to go with them. She would have been there too.” His jaw clenches so hard that the veins in his neck and up his temple pop. “Bet they’d have made my father watch *that*, too.”

“Nero—“

“Shut. The *fuck*. Up.”

The words erupt like gunfire from his lips. And his eyes…

They hold nothing but fury.

Pure hatred.

“I was going to go as well, you know. But instead, I made other plans. There was this girl I’d started talking to—”

“Nero—“

I scream, stumbling back from the bars as he surges right into them, his face a mask of terror, his teeth bared as he grabs hold of the metal.

“Interrupt me again, and I swear to God I’ll fucking kill you right now.”

Sudden twisting pain lances through my chest, hurting so badly that for a second, I think I’ve actually been shot, or stabbed, and that somehow I missed it.

But it’s no weapon or bullet.

Just his words, eviscerating me and carving my heart from my chest.

Seeing the man I've fallen in love with—*twice*—looking me right in the eye and telling me in the plainest terms possible that he *hates me*.

"So… I skipped dinner to meet this girl I'd been talking to." His lips curl to a cruel sneer. "Well, *writing* to. Via *notes*, left in a goddamn book. We met after telling each other our dark, dirty little kinks. We wore masks."

A tear starts to trickle down my face.

"And that night, I chased her, and fucked her, and *fell. For. HER*!" he roars, making me choke on a terrified whimper as I jump away from him.

"That girl was *you*, Milena," he says, more quietly. "Don't try to tell me it wasn't. I knew you were her the second I touched you again that first night here at Greymoor. I knew the first time I tasted you…kissed you…fucked you."

A sneer ripples over his face.

"My little *pen pal*," he says dryly. "But…" he rasps. "What I didn't know, was *that*."

He jabs a finger past me, pointing to the screen on the wall.

"And you'll make sure Nero is at the spot you agreed on?"

"Of course, Papa."

"Excellent. If that changes, let me know immediately."

"Yes, Papa."

I'm white as I turn back to him.

"*Okay*," I whisper. "Yes, it was me writing to you. But I didn't…" I close my eyes, hugging myself as a chill rips through me. "I didn't know it was *you* writing back."

He barks out a joyless laugh.

"I wanted it to be!" I blurt, the tears falling more freely now. "I really, really wanted it to be you. Since we've been together—"

"We're not fucking *together*."

A sob strangles in my throat.

"Since…this, then," I say, weeping. "I've wondered about it all the time, if it *was* you. I wanted it to be you *so much*. Tonight, I was reading our old notes—I…" I look down. "I saved them."

He says nothing.

"I came across one where you were talking about Krakatoa. And you always finished them with "be heard", which you said the other day. And—"

"This is a *lovely* fucking story, Milena," Nero snarls. "But you're conveniently leaving out the part where you *SET ME UP!!*"

His roar is so brutal that I scream and stumble backward, tripping over the chain around my feet. I hit the ground with a painful smack, sobbing as hot tears stream down my face.

"*Save it*," he snarls. "The little crying act isn't going to work."

"It's not an act!" I wail. "And *that!*"…I turn and jam a finger at the TV…"Is not me! I never had that conversation with my father! It's overdubbed or something! Maybe it's voice actors! Or AI!"

Nero barks another thin, cold laugh. "*AI*? Are you fucking kidding me, Milena? How very *au courant*. Fuck off."

"*I never set you up*!" I scream at him. "I didn't know until I got home that night that my uncle had sent men—"

My mouth snaps shut.

The room goes still.

And suddenly, though I wouldn't have thought it possible, he looks even angrier.

“You…” His face contorts with rage. “You *knew*,” he snarls lethally.

I’m trembling as I shake my head side to side. “*Nero*—”

“Let’s pretend,” he hisses, “that I believe for one fucking second that you didn’t set me up—*no*,” he snaps. “Do *not* fucking talk right now.” His jaw grinds. “Let’s say that you *just happened* to come meet me and fuck me right before assholes with guns barged in and tried to kill me after murdering my parents at my father's restaurant.”

His hands tighten so hard around the bars that his knuckles go white.

“You still went home that night and found out that the men who killed my parents *were sent by your family*.”

I swallow, trembling.

“DIDN'T YOU!!” he bellows.

“*Yes!*” I sob, crying freely as I hug myself, shaking all over. “Nero! I’m sor—”

“*I don’t want your fucking sorry*!!” he roars. “You *knew*. You kept meeting up with me, and fucking me, and you listened to me tell you about my goddamn parents, and the whole time *you fucking knew* that it was your family that killed mine!!”

Darkness throbs around us as I drop to my knees, crying and shaking.

“I’m proud of you, *malyshka*. Doing what the family needs you to do.”

“Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do. Besides, he means nothing to me. It’s all a means to an end.”

“*It’s not me…*” I croak, trembling as the tears roll down my face. I look up at him through tear-blurred eyes, pleading with him. “*Nero*…”

“Well, now it’s *you* who means nothing to *me*,” he growls coldly. “So you’re going to stay here until I figure out how I’m going to get my pound of flesh.” His eyes bore into me. “How I’ll break you. How I’ll destroy you, and everything you love.”

The sound of my weeping fills the darkness.

“Because like I said, Milena,” he says, his voice utterly devoid of emotion again, “you mean nothing to me. And this is all just *a means to an end*. Isn’t that right.”

I’m still sobbing as he turns and walks out of the light, into the shadows, and from the room. A heavy metal door slams behind him, leaving me crying on my knees in the cold darkness, the TV still looping.

“I’m proud of you, *malyshka*. Doing what the family needs you to do.”

“Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do.”

31

NERO

I STAND OVER HER, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest.

She finally fell asleep.

She's curled on her side on the cot, one arm folded beneath her cheek, the other wrapped around her body, protecting her like the blanket she doesn't have.

Her skin is smudged and dirty, pebbled with goosebumps as she shivers slightly in her sleep.

I fight against that part of me that wants to warm her. I *kill* the piece of me that still wants to take her in my arms and tell her it's going to be okay.

It's not.

My gaze drags over her filthy, torn dress, stained with grime and sweat. One strap hangs off her shoulders, and I won't deny the flicker of heat in my pulse when I see the way the hem has slipped up her bare thighs.

Fuck. She might be a wrecked version of the little princess ballerina she usually is. But even in captivity, in my chains, she's still got her hair up in that fucking ponytail, as always.

The steel manacle remains around her ankle, the other end of the chain locked to the bars. She's not going anywhere, not until I decide what I'm doing to her next.

I should feel satisfaction as I consider how best to seek my revenge.

But I don't. I just feel wrecked, tired, and as much a captive as she is.

I study her, rage burning in my chest despite whatever I feel for her.

She did it. Maybe she didn't pull the trigger on my parents herself. But she was part of the apparatus that night.

Yes, Papa.

She didn't just lead them to me, and get me alone so they could take a shot at me. She pulled me away from my mother and father. Maybe I would have been killed execution-style, same as my father, if I'd gone that night.

But then again, maybe I could have saved them. Could have fought back, shielded them. Bought them time.

But I'll never know, because this woman lured me away from them.

I drag a hand through my hair, fingers twitching as they tighten into a fist.

What if, though?

The thought's been plaguing me since I left her and went back upstairs to pace the empty Greymoor Mansion.

What if she's telling the truth? What if the video *is* a fake?

What if she didn't know what she was being used for? What if she wasn't being used *at all*?

…What if it wasn't a setup, and the violence that rained down upon my life that night was just a horrible coincidence?

My eyes linger on her.

No. She let it slip earlier that she knew. Maybe not when she first came to me that night. Maybe not when I chased her, and pinned her, and fucked her.

But at some point, she found out that it was *her* fucking family who'd sent the guns that went after mine. She knew it back then, and when whatever this thing is between us started.

And she kept it from me. That screams "guilt" to me.

It also screams heartache and darkness. A soul-crushing pain that stabs like a knife and sears like fire.

Because for all the rage and the hate I carry in my heart for her now, there's something else that was there before, whenever I looked at her. Held her. Even just thought of her.

Love.

The same love that I *still* goddamn feel as I look at her right this second, even after everything, and with all that I know now.

I wish I could carve that feeling out of me. But it's in too deep, woven too far into the fibers of my being to ever be extricated.

I was in love with Milena even before I knew her name. I loved her in our letters. Loved her when I held her for the first time and tasted her moans on my lips.

Loved her when I lost her and then fell in love with her all over again when I found her. Like my fucking cells knew, even if my brain didn't. Like there's a chemical reaction that'll always bring us back together.

I *ache* with love for her. I might fucking hate her for any role she played. I might hate her for keeping that awful secret from me.

But mostly, I hate her right now because I can't actually *bring myself* to hate her.

Was it real? Did I actually love *her*? Or did I fall in love with a ghost she created?

Either way.

Here we are.

I bend down and pick up the metal bucket of water. I take in her sleeping form.

Rise and shine, princess.

Milena screams and sits up with a choked cry when I dump the water onto her.

She scrambles to shield herself. Her eyes are wide, hair plastered to her face, dress translucent and clinging to her body like a second skin.

She splutters and gasps, skittering back on the cot before she looks up at me.

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?!" she spits, glaring up at me.

The expression on her face shreds something inside me. It's not fear. Not fury.

It's heartbreak.

Then I toss the bucket away. It hits the ground and smashes into the bars with a loud, violent *CLANG*, making her eyes snap to the side.

"Little jumpy, are we?"

She tries to put that defiant front back up. But it's just a show, and we both know it. I see her throat working as she swallows. Notice the way her eyes dart over my face, like she's looking for a chink in my armor. A way out.

She won't find either.

I stand there, looming over her as the water trickles down her face. Her ponytail lies limp and bedraggled down her back. Her eye makeup is smudged.

Her dress…

Fuck.

The white summery thing is clinging to her like a second skin.

Hugging every curve.

Every *crease*.

The wet dress is so transparent that I can see the swell of her small tits and the soft pink flush of her nipples as they tighten to hard points.

I rip my gaze away.

"I can assume your father and his little fucker of a brother, Levka, were in charge," I growl quietly. "But who else in the organization was involved with what happened that night?"

There's just silence behind me. I take a slow breath as I turn on my heel to face her again.

"If you think I'm fucking around," I murmur, "let me demonstrate *exactly* how wrong you are."

My hand slips into my back pocket, pulling out a knife and flicking it open with a soft *shnick*.

Milena's lips tremble as her eyes snap to the gleaming blade.

"*Who the fuck else was involved, Milena*. Rurik, maybe? To be clear, I'm curious because I'm making a list of the people I'm going to skin, *alive.* Then I'll slowly shave pieces off them for… I haven't decided. Probably at *least* two weeks."

Her body shivers, even if she clearly tries to hold it back.

"Maybe that's a threat, maybe it's a promise." I examine the knife in my hand thoughtfully. "Maybe I just like sharp objects."

She purses her lips. "People are going to be looking for me."

"I don't doubt it."

"They *know* I was with you, Nero," she mutters.

"I'll keep that in mind. Who the fuck helped—"

"What is your goal here?!" she blurts, lurching to her feet. "How does this end, Nero?! You gonna *stab* me?! Skin me alive?!" She shudders. "*Torture* me if I don't tell you who was involved in the war with your family?"

I choke out a bitter laugh.

"It wasn't a war, *princess*," I snarl. "It was an unprovoked massacre."

She scowls. "It was retaliation. Your family shot first."

I bark a cold laugh.

"Your father sent a sniper to my father's—"

"That's not how it went down," I hiss.

"Yes, it is."

"Oh?" I smile coldly at her. "Who in your family was killed, Milena? Who was hurt, or even *inconvenienced* by this preemptive sniper attack? Hmm?!" I glare at her smugly as she curls in on herself.

"No?" I grunt. "No idea?"

"People were hurt!" she snaps.

"*Who*."

Her eyes flicker side to side.

"Is it that you don't know because no one ever told you their names?" My eyes burn into her. "Or because *it didn't happen*?"

Her lips curl. "*Fuck. You*. There are a hundred men who work for my father in this city alone. I can't—"

“Be expected to know who they are?” I snort. “Spoken like a true princess in her ivory tower. I know the name of *every single man* who works for me,” I growl. “I know who they sleep next to. I know their *children’s* names.”

She purses her lips, throat bobbing.

“My father wasn’t involved with any of it,” she says quietly.

I roll my eyes. “Is this where you tell me you were talking to some tech bullshit hologram on that video?”

“My father was undergoing heavy treatment for cancer when your family was attacked,” Milena says evenly. “He was pumped so full of chemo that he was barely conscious.”

“How tragic.”

“Asshole,” she fires back. Her eyes drop to the knife in my hand again. “Is this the part where you skin me alive?”

“Maybe I use it to cut that fucking dress off you, put you on your knees, and rail your slutty cunt until you understand just how *fucked* you are, *princess*,” I snarl.

Milena’s face goes red. Her mouth falls open, eyes widening.

Fuck, that dress is *way* too transparent right now.

It’s still clinging to her every curve, molding to her pert tits, to her dancer's hips and ass. I can see the pale pink of her nipples, tight under the thin fabric. The valley between her thighs as the dress clings to it.

She takes a shaky breath, her lip catching between her teeth. Then her gaze drops down to herself, her cheeks heating before she slowly looks back up at me.

“That what you came down here for?” she spits. “A power trip? To *ogle* the girl you locked in a fucking cage? Want me to dance around and fucking *strip* for you, asshole?”

I peer at her darkly. “A, watch the fucking tone. And B, *maybe*.”

She swallows heavily, stiffening.

I fold the knife up, sliding it back into my pocket. When I start to walk toward her, her breath catches sharply. A small sound escapes her lips as she backs away from me, and I can’t tell if the sound pisses me off or turns me the fuck on.

I stop right in front of her, looming over her petite frame as my eyes bore into hers. She trembles, but her chin still juts defiantly as she stands proud, her posture saying “fuck you” even though she’s shaking.

“This your thing, Nero?” she says quietly. “Locking girls up? Waking them up with water poured over them like some fucked-up—”

She whimpers—*whimpers*—when my hand juts out and wraps around her throat.

“I said *watch. The. Fucking. Tone*,” I snarl.

Her throat works against my palm, her pulse a staccato beat against my fingers.

“*Or what*,” she croaks. “You’ll put me in cage?”

A low, dark laugh rumbles in my chest. “You’re just hell bent on pushing me until I break, aren’t you? You think this is a stupid fucking *game*, Milena?”

She shivers. “I think this is about you not having the control over me you thought you would when you locked me in this fucking—”

Her eyes bulge wide, her breath gasping as my hand slides off of her throat, pushes up her jaw, and then suddenly wraps her ponytail in a fist.

I’m not sure what’s just done it. Her attitude. That *fucking* mouth. The way we’re standing here, nose to nose, like I’m not the one holding all the power.

Or maybe it’s the way her soaked little dress clings to her like a second skin.

The sheer fabric. The tight nipples. The fucking *defiance* where there should be fear.

Whatever it is, it's that last little bit from her smart little mouth that pushes me over the edge and eradicates the last of my restraint.

"You're right, princess," I hiss at her. "I'm *not* exerting the control over you that I should be. Thank you so much for illustrating that to me so that I can *correct it*."

Her eyes go wide and she gasps quietly when I give her hair a sharp, firm tug, then whimpers as I tighten it around my fist.

"On your knees."

Milena shivers, her breath catching.

"On. Your. Fucking. *Knees*," I hiss.

"Is that an order?"

"It's a very strong suggestion."

She swallows. "And if I say no?"

"Are you?"

No answer.

"*Good girl*."

I give her hair another tug, coaxing her down.

Slowly, her eyes locked on me, she starts to lower herself, until her knees are resting on the cold concrete.

My dick is rock hard and my pulse thuds in my ears as I look down, drinking in the sight of Milena on her knees looking up at me, hands clasped in her lap and her nipples about to tear through that fucking dress.

"Take out my cock."

Her face flushes.

"*Do it*," I command.

She swallows, her tongue darting out to wet her lips as her eyes drop to the front of my obscenely tented pants.

I'm so fucking hard that my cock twitches from her just *looking* at my erection, straining against the front of my slacks as her mouth opens a little.

Her hands reach for my belt, tugging it open with a light jangle. Then the button. She struggles for a second before she gets the zipper down over my bulging dick.

Her fingers slip into the waistband of my briefs. I watch her chest rise and fall, her eyes glassing over as she slowly tugs them and my pants down together.

A whimpered little gasp of surprise tumbles from her mouth when my cock springs free, thick and heavy, right in front of her face. I'm so hard that it curves slightly up, the veins standing out and a thick white drop of precum beading at the tip.

And fuck me, the look on her face as she stares at me with hunger in her eyes…

I groan, the drop of precum slowly rolling down the underside.

Milena starts to reach for me, but I shake my head.

"Uh-uh, princess," I growl. "No hands." I wrap a hand around the base of my cock, stroking myself slowly right in front of her flushed face. "Open that pretty mouth so that I can *fuck it* properly."

Her throat works. Her face turns even redder.

And she opens wide.

I groan and hiss in pleasure as I push inside, sinking into her hot little mouth. Chills ripple up my spine as her tongue flicks over my head and the underside. My cock leaks precum across her tongue as a needy moan rumbles in her throat.

My hand tightens in her ponytail, and my jaw clenches.

“You were asking what my *thing* is, princess?” I growl. “Right now, my *thing* is fucking this pretty mouth like a cunt. I’m going to fuck it until I fill it with every drop of my cum. Blink if you fucking understand me.”

Her eyes blink rapidly. Her chest rises and falls quicker, her tongue dancing over my swollen head.

“Keep it open wide like a good girl, Milena.”

My hips roll back, and we’re off to the fucking races.

When I told her I was going to fuck her mouth, I didn’t mean “receive head” or “feel her lips around my cock”.

I meant *fuck. Her. Mouth*.

So that's exactly what I do.

I use her hot little mouth like it’s my personal fuck hole. She chokes and moans, whimpering and drooling all over my cock as I slide out and then ram back into the back of her throat. She chokes and gags, her throat muscles rippling over my dick as I grunt in pleasure.

Her eyes meet mine, watering in the corners but blazing with fire. I groan as I grip her ponytail harder, my other hand cupping her jaw as I thrust down her throat.

“Swallow every inch like a good girl, princess,” I hiss through grit teeth as the pleasure builds within me. “Make a fucking mess of my cock, baby. Fuck, you look so pretty with your drool and my cum all over your face.”

She moans deeply, her thighs clenching together as I fuck her mouth like it really is her pussy. Spit and precum leak from the corners of her lips, dripping down her chin and onto her dress. Her nipples strain against the fabric, hard and pink. It only fuels me on as I thrust over her tongue and down her throat.

Her hands twist in her lap, her fingers curling against her core.

I grin savagely.

“Mmmm, *fuck*,” I rasp. “Is that needy little pussy getting jealous of this mouth? Is that what you’re secretly trying to do? Touch that greedy cunt?”

Milena groans deeply, her eyes rolling back as I thrust harder into her throat.

“Take it all down that throat, baby. That’s what good girls do. Such a pretty little mess you are.”

She whimpers, humming and moaning around my dick as I fuck her mouth. My balls get tighter, my abs clenching as her tongue dances and swirls, her throat squeezing my swollen head until it feels like I’m going to explode.

“You keep sucking that cock like a greedy whore and I’m going to cum,” I grunt.

Her moans get louder, wilder. She squirms on her knees and takes my cock even deeper.

“You have my permission to play with that slutty pussy now, princess.”

Her hands are a blur as they yank up her dress and shove under it. A humming, whining sound comes from her throat as her arms jerk, fingers rubbing hard under the fabric.

Seeing her on her knees, precum and spit all over her face, throating my cock while she frantically rubs her clit, desperate to come, pushes me over the edge.

With a groan, I ram deep into her throat and then pull out. Milena gasps for air, thick strands of spit dangling between her lips and my cock as I wrap my hand around it and *stroke*.

It only takes two pumps before I feel my balls draw up tight.

“Open that pretty princess mouth, baby,” I groan.

She moans as she opens wide, a look of pleasure on her face as she rubs her pussy.

The first rope of cum lands hot and heavy across her tongue. The next one on her lips and chin. I hiss darkly, pumping my swollen dick as more and more cum spurts across her face, until she's dripping with me.

"*Fuck!*"

She screams, convulsing on her knees, coming against her fingers.

When I see that, my cock stays *rock-hard*.

I want more.

A lot more.

A blood-red mist clouds my vision as I spin her around and roughly push her face-down onto the cot. Milena gasps, shivering and breathing heavily as I yank up her torn dress, rip her panties down her thighs, and kneel behind her.

Christ, she's fucking *soaked*.

Even in the dim light, I can see her pink pussy is *dripping,* glistening with her arousal as I stroke my cock and line up behind her.

She moans when I rub the swollen head over her messy cunt and push it across her throbbing hard clit, making her shudder. Her breath catches sharply as I drag my head up, through her glistening lips…

Then higher.

Her body goes rigid as I rub the slick head of my cock over her asshole.

"*Nero—*"

I spit on her ass, using my thick head to rub it into her tight little hole, madness surging inside of me. A lust for power and control over every single part of her.

Maybe my darkness found its match in her.

Or maybe this woman just makes me insane.

"You're going to reach back," I growl, rubbing my head against her clenched back hole, feeling it pulse against me. "And you're going to play with that little pussy while I pry this tight little hole open with my cock."

A choked sound wrenches from her throat, a moan she's almost afraid to let out.

I spit on her ass again, getting it nice and slick as I stroke my cock and center the head against her puckered hole.

Milena's hands—not one, both—instantly shove underneath her and reach back between her legs. Her breath is coming fast, her body trembling as she frantically rubs her pussy.

I grit my teeth, that red mist still clouding my reality as I push harder against her unyielding little ring.

"Let me in, princess," I hiss, feeling her clench and spasm against my head. "The more you resist, the more I want to bury my big cock in your slutty little asshole."

She chokes out another wrenching, strangled moan. Her fingers are a blur between her legs as her breath hitches and her body shivers.

My palm smacks her ass, making her yelp and moan.

"Stop fighting me, baby. I'm not going anywhere until I'm buried balls-deep in this tight fucking hole." I grit my teeth, my fingers digging into her skin as I push a little more. "This ass is fucking *mine*," I growl. "So let me in to *my* fucking hole."

Milena chokes a strangled, haunted little moan. Then I feel her ass unclench.

Good girl.

My head slowly pushes into her, my cock still slick from her spit and my cum as it pops inside, sinking through the last of her

resistance.

"*Hnnngg*!"

Fuck, the sound she makes as I push inside almost makes me lose my mind.

It's the sound of utter submission.

Of her feeling me take the very last part of her.

Knowing how fucking *mine* she is.

That low, whining whimper hums in her throat as I slowly start to push in deeper, cramming another inch up her hot little asshole.

Her hands start rubbing her pussy again, her legs trembling as her back arches.

"*Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck…*"

She's chanting it like a mantra as I slide another inch inside her. Then another. Darkness swirls through my consciousness as I reach up and grab that fucking ponytail. She moans when I do so, her back arching as I sink deeper.

"Your greedy pussy takes me like such a whore," I groan. "But this little ass still wants to fight me, doesn't it?"

I grunt as I push deeper into her, stretching her hole open.

"Go ahead and try to fight me, princess. I *am* going to take it. And I'm going to *keep* taking it until you're my moaning, begging, desperate little anal slut."

Another inch slides in. Then another. I groan, looking down to where her back hole is stretched tight around me, like it's trying to strangle my dick. Her hands are still buried between her quivering legs, rubbing her slick, wet pussy as gasping, choked little moans tumble from her mouth against the cot. Her feet twist and turn, her body trembling as with a groan as I sink the very last few inches all the way up her ass.

"*Unnngggg*!" she grunts. Her head is twisted to the side, resting on one cheek. Her eyes are shut. Fuck me, the look of *need* on her face sends my blood roaring.

My body throbs and hums with dark hunger as I slowly draw back. Milena whines, rubbing her pussy faster as her asshole grips my dick and wrings the blood from it when I slide out of her.

"*Hnnng—fuck!*" she squeals when I push back inside, burying my fat cock up her ass to the hilt.

"*There* you go, princess," I growl, pulling back and then pushing back in as savagery claws at the corners of my reality. "Taking it up the ass like a such a good girl. You're such a good little anal slut for me, baby."

Out.

In.

Clench.

Squeeze.

I fucking love the way she normally moans—a high, tight, little whimper. But right now, the sound that claws its way out of her throat is different. Guttural. Feral. Choked and needy. A low, deep, aching moan that drives me fucking *wild* as I start to fuck her ass harder. Deeper. Making her take every fucking inch with every goddamn thrust of my hips.

"Where's my cock, Milena."

She chokes on a cry, her face crumpling as she rubs her pussy wildly.

"Where."

Thrust.

"Is."

Thrust.

"My."

Thrust.

"Cock."

"*My ass!!!*" she squeals as her body wrenches and twists, her feet kicking wildly, her back arching.

Fuck me.

She just came.

I groan as I ram back into her, my hips crashing into her ass with a slap.

"My goodness," I growl. "Did my little slut just come with my fat cock up her ass?"

She's sobbing and moaning, whimpering as her body ripples and clenches around me. I grit my teeth, snarling like a wild animal as I grab her ponytail tighter, yanking her head back and making her back arch. My teeth grit as I fuck her ass harder, pounding into her until she starts to go fucking berserk under me.

"Where's my big fucking cock, princess?" I snarl.

"*My ass*!" she screams.

"And who does this slutty little hole belong to?"

"*You!*" she chokes. "My ass is yours!"

"Mmmm, *fuck*!" I hiss. "Such a greedy hole, taking that fat cock like a good girl."

"*Use me*!" she whines. "*Use my ass, please!!*"

The last of my restraint breaks. The final barrier between me and madness falls.

I know—I've *always* known, because she told me years ago—how badly Milena craves submission. How her "thing" is having control forcibly taken from her.

But this feels like going a step further.

Control utterly surrendered.

Complete fucking submission.

On her knees in a cell, chained up, bent over a cot with her panties around her knees, my cum on her face, and my fat cock reaming out her ass as she rubs her pussy.

"I'm going to *use* this tight little asshole whenever I fucking want," I snarl as she moans again. "Because what you are is my eager little fuck doll, Milena. With willing little holes for me to use, and fuck, and *cum in* whenever I want."

Her body tenses, her breath coming in ragged bursts as her ass clenches so tight around me that I can't hold back any longer.

I pound her ass like a madman, my hips crashing into her over and over as she rubs her pussy. Suddenly, she spasms beneath me.

"*Hnnnggg-aahh!*"

Her entire body wrenches and jerks as her orgasm slams into her—so hard that her legs actually give out and she collapses against the edge of the cot. I groan, pinning her in place as I ram into her and finally let go, my whole world going white and blank as cum *explodes* out of my dick.

I've never come like this before.

It feels endless, a wave that just keeps crashing against the shore over and over. My cum spurts deep in her hot little hole, pump after pump, rope after rope. I literally cannot stop coming as she squeezes, milking every drop from me.

Milena is limp on the cot, her whole body trembling. Her breath comes in tiny, choked gasps as I slowly pull my cock from her

ruined little ass.

I leave her with my cum dripping down her leg as I turn and walk out of the cage.

Forcing myself not to look back.

Not to care.

Not to run to her, kiss her, tell her it’s all forgiven, that I love her.

No.

Right now, I have to hate her.

32

MILENA

THE WRENCHING, creaking sound of the lock on the basement door twisting open gets me up from the cot.

I wasn't sleeping, even though I'm utterly exhausted. I don't know *how* I managed to fall asleep the first time in this hellish hole. But it's not happening again.

I have no idea how long I've been down here. A day? Three? I *do* know my body is wrecked and sore. I know I'm starving. I know I desperately need to use the bathroom, but there is no way in hell I'm using that fucking bucket.

But I don't know what to feel anymore.

I hate him.

I love him.

He disgusts me.

I crave him.

I'm somewhere in the middle of it all, in the center of a four-circle Venn diagram.

Last night—or whenever it was—after he fucked my mouth, and my ass, and gave me what I hate to admit might be the biggest orgasm of my life… He just *left*.

I guess it would be dumb to hope for pillow talk when he apparently hates me.

…Even though what he hates me *for* is utter bullshit.

I never said those things to my father. I *know* it's a doctored video. I'd never say those things or agree to set Nero up for an ambush.

That's just not who I am. And what makes it even more impossible to believe is that back then, when I was going to meet him, not even knowing who he was, I was already in love with him.

My pen pal.

I swore to myself we were just meeting because he was into the same fucked-up kinks I was. That he could help me explore them. That it was just two friends with similar tastes who were meeting to indulge them, nothing more.

But the truth is, I'd already fallen in love with him, without ever having met him, touched him, or kissed him.

For that reason alone, I *know* there's no way I would have ever agreed to lead my father's men to him, despite what that bullshit video says.

Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do. Besides, he means nothing to me. It's all a means to an end.

I literally would *never* have said that. Ever. And that's all ignoring the fact that my father couldn't even *speak* during that period. He was barely conscious, lying in bed, being pumped full of poison.

But there's another facet to this that I keep shying away from, because it's a truth that hurts.

I *did* know.

Even though I didn't set him up, I *did* go home that night and hear directly from my uncle that *my family* had sent men after Nero's.

I knew that, and four years later, when our paths crossed again, I kept fucking him, and I didn't say a thing about what happened in the past. I can try and sugarcoat it, say that I wasn't sure if the man I'd met four years ago was Nero or Laz…

But I think I've always known it was Nero. The questions and doubts were just the last little part of me that wasn't sure I *wanted it* to be him.

And even when that last question was snuffed out, when I knew for sure—when he told me the story of that night, and his parents being murdered—*I knew and I said nothing.*

For that, I *am* guilty.

Maybe I do deserve to be locked in here.

The basement door shudders as it wrenches inward. Nero walks in, not looking at me, a tray in his hand. He walks over to the door of the cage, unlocking it with another heavy metallic clank.

Part of me wants to point out to him the absurdity of even locking the cage, considering I can't even *reach* that side of it since I'm chained to this one. Or, even more absurdly, locking the door to the basement, as if I'd *ever* get that far.

But I stay quiet as he swings the cage door open and steps in. I try to catch his eye as he moves toward me, but he purposefully avoids my gaze as he drops the tray at my feet.

"Food," he grunts, nodding at a bottle of water, a bag of pretzel sticks, and a slightly burned piece of toast.

I don't care how pathetic I look: I instantly drop to my knees and attack the food, almost swallowing the toast whole as my stomach groans in joy. I choke down half the pretzels before I reach for the water. Then I tense as my bladder screams.

"Nero?"

No answer.

"Nero, I have to use the bathroom."

"Your commode awaits," he growls, pointing to the bucket.

"*Nero*…"

His piercing green eyes finally swivel to clash with mine. "*What*," he snarls darkly.

"I…I'm not going to use a fucking bucket."

His lips curl. "Oh, is this not up to standards for a princess like—"

"It's not up to the standards of *humane fucking conditions*," I snap coldly. "May I *please* use an actual bathroom?"

He draws in a slow breath through his nose.

"Fine."

He walks past me, squatting down to the lock that keeps my chain attached to the bars, and uses a key to open it. He stands again, pulling the chain behind him, tugging it when it goes taut.

I'm on a freaking leash.

"Well?" he mutters.

I stand on shaky legs, walking barefoot after him as we exit the cage. I turn to head for the door that leads to the stairs going up, but Nero tugs the chain, pulling me in another direction.

"This way."

I follow him across the large basement until he reaches another door and tugs it open on rusty hinges.

There's a toilet and a sink inside.

I blink and then slowly turn my head to stare openmouthed at him.

“This works?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Yes…?”

“And it was here the whole—”

“If you’re still mistaking this for the Ritz fucking Carlton,” he snaps, “I’d be happy to pour more cold water over you while you’re sleeping next time.”

I shift my eyes past him, to the bathroom.

“I… I could really use a shower,” I mumble.

“Terrific. Use the sink,” he says flatly. “Now, are you going in or not?”

I nod, quickly walking past him.

Fuck, his scent hits me hard: leather, a hint of bergamot, a bit of spice.

It’s so *him*, and this whole situation is so *not* him, that my chest tightens.

I start to close the door, but Nero sticks his foot in front of it.

“Yeah, no.”

“Seriously, what am I going to do?” I snap. “Tunnel out? Or do you just want to watch me pee that badly?”

He glowers at me. Then he moves, and I gasp as he squeezes his large body into the tiny bathroom with me, pushing me tight to the sink. He leans down, and I hear the clank of the lock as he secures my chain to the pipes under the sink.

He steps back out of the bathroom and blinks impassively at me.

“I reserve the right to open the door at any time.”

“Got it,” I mumble as I shut the door in his face.

I use the bathroom, then I take off my filthy dress and use the rickety sink and the tiny scrap of god-only-knows how old bar soap to wash myself. By the time I’m done, I’m dripping wet, and there’s no towel, but I at least feel a bit cleaner.

I pull the dress back on, no longer even caring that it shows everything as it clings to my wet body.

When I step out, Nero glares at me. “All dewy and fresh?” he says sarcastically.

“Not really,” I mumble. “Can I get some fresh clothes or something?”

He smiles icily.

“No.”

He leads me back to the cage, locks my chain to the bars, and shuts the door. Then he walks over to the TV and turns it on. The infernal loop starts again.

“Are you ready for tonight?”

“Yes Papa, I’m ready.”

I groan, sinking onto the cot and burying my face in my hands.

“I already told you,” I blurt at him. “That didn’t happen!”

“You’ll make sure Nero is at the spot you agreed on?”

“Of course, Papa.”

Nero turns to smile coldly at me. “Figured I’d give you something to watch to pass the time,” he growls. “Until you’re ready to admit what you did.”

“It's *fake*!!”

“Excellent. If that changes, let me know immediately.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Goddammit!!” I scream at Nero through the bars between us, tears beading in my eyes. “You want me to admit it!? FINE! I’m actually a sociopath who spent *months* getting to know you via fucking letters, so that I could help with my family's masterplan to kill you. Surprise!!”

I spit the words venomously into the dim light of the basement.

“I’m proud of you, *malyshka*. Doing what the family needs you to do.”

“Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do. Besides, he means nothing to me. It’s all a means to an end.”

Nero grins again. “Well, I'll just leave this running, then.”

“I just admitted it!” I scream at him. “It was me, okay?! *I* tried to get you killed. I’m responsible for all of it. Now can I get out of this fucking cage?!”

The video starts to loop again.

“Are you ready for tonight?”

“Yes Papa, I’m ready.”

“You’ll make sure Nero is at the spot you agreed on?”

“Of course, Papa.”

A sob wracks my body as I drop back onto the cot. It doesn’t matter what I say. I’m already guilty in his eyes.

“I’m proud of you, *malyshka*. Doing what the family needs you to do.”

I jolt as my head snaps up. Nero’s already reaching for the basement door knob when I lurch to my feet.

“Wait!” I yell. “Rewind it!”

He turns to frown at me. “What?”

“The tape!”

“It’s on a loop. What the fuck for?”

“Just wait!” I blurt, my chest heaving as I stare at the TV screen.

It loops again, until it gets to the part where I tell my father about the location.

“I’m proud of you, *malyshka*,” my father says on screen. “Doing what the family needs you to do.”

“THERE!” I yell. “Right *there*! Proof that this is all bullshit!”

Nero looks at me half like he’s amused, half like he's questioning my sanity.

“*Malyshka,*” I choke out. “That’s Russian for baby girl.” My eyes lock with Nero’s. “My father *never* calls me *malyshka.* He calls me *SOLnyshka*, for little sun.” I tug on a lock of my blonde hair. “Because of my hair?”

Nero stares at me. Then he looks to the screen. Then he looks back at me. My pulse races, a nervous laugh bubbling up from my throat.

“See?!” I blurt wildly. “*See*?! It’s fake! He’d never say *malyshka*! He’d have said *solnyshka*!” I stab my finger at the TV. “It’s all a lie!”

Nero blinks, his green eyes slicing into me.

My lips curl slightly at the corners as a hopeful smile dares to peek out.

“I’d ration the rest of those pretzels. Might be a while before you get more food.”

My heart drops like a stone. The hopeful smile withers and dies on my lips.

Without another word, he turns, walks through the door, and locks it behind him.

33

NERO

I DON'T POUR water on her this time.

Actually, I don't wake her at all. Not when she's finally asleep after forcing herself to stay awake for close to twenty-four hours. I just watch her, here in the cage with her.

It's almost day three of her being here. She wasn't wrong about being missed. People *are* looking for her. Like, a lot of people.

Chief amongst them, obviously, is Marko Kalishnik. The motherfucker was waiting at the curb outside my house last night when I drove home to pick up some shit. Him, his security guy Rurik, and about twenty other men.

Dom already had about thirty of our guys *also* waiting outside the house, in case shit went down.

Luckily, it didn't.

"Where's my daughter," Marko had asked me bluntly.

I lied.

I mean, obviously.

I told him we'd gone out to dinner, and that we'd had a nice time. He clearly already knew I'd been with her, which is why he was there in the first place.

Rule number one when it comes to lying: *don't.* if it's not necessary.

I told him we'd had a great night at Oolong, and even told him he could call Jon, the maître d', to verify my story.

Not a problem there. Jon's been paid *very* well for his services that night and is probably expecting such a call.

I told Marko that after dinner, I'd taken Milena to the Mercury Theatre, where the Zakharova Ballet is based, at her request. I told him she hadn't had anything to drink at dinner, and that she'd told me she had some practice to get in. That I'd watched her unlock the back door and walk in.

He can check the records. Milena's code for the back door, which was conveniently on her phone, *was* entered that night at about 11:30.

Marko Kalishnik is not a stupid man. I'm not sure if he completely believed my story, but he also didn't slit my throat on Central Park South. Just told me Milena was missing, that he was looking for her, and that he'd have eyes on me, constantly, until she was found.

I believe him, too.

This is why I've had Dom running interference for me, having some of my guys who look sort of like me dress in my clothes and get escorted into SUVs which are then driven to the ass end of pretty much every borough in New York.

Might as well keep Marko busy while he fruitlessly looks for Milena.

Besides, he doesn't need to worry.

She's safe.

Mostly.

I watch her sleep, her hand tucked under her face and her knees drawn up. I want to believe her. More than fucking *anything*, I want to believe her. But I can't allow myself to.

I exhale as I squat down next to her, watching her sleep. My hand reaches out on autopilot to brush a strand of hair away from her face, but I stop myself halfway, glowering.

What was, cannot be again. Whatever we were, or whatever we might've been about to become… That part is over.

It's not like I can keep her here forever. But I don't know the script for this.

This time, when I reach again for the strand of hair, I don't stop myself as I push it back from her cheek. She smiles quietly, still asleep, shifting a little. Her skin is pebbled with goosebumps. Fuck, it really *is* chilly down here.

I drape the heavy blanket over her.

I leave a fresh sandwich, apple, banana, new bag of pretzels, a bottle of orange juice, and a large bottle of water on the tray next to her cot, picking up the old one as I stand.

I don't know what comes next.

I don't know how to get past this.

Most of all, I don't know how to stop loving her.

God*damn* her for that.

34

MILENA

THE FOOD IS A NICE TOUCH.

So was the blanket I woke up to find draped over me. I'm also not chained anymore: the manacle around my ankle is gone.

The food is making me feel a little more clear-headed—which may or may not be a good thing. The sleep helped, too, though I can't actually believe I *did* fall asleep again. But I guess after forcing myself to stay awake for God knows how long, it had to happen eventually.

I sit quietly on the edge of the cot on day…who knows…slowly eating the sandwich. I'd like to say that after days in this hellhole, *anything* would taste good.

…But even so, it's a pretty fucking tasty sandwich.

Plus, it's a distraction from everything going on in my head right now. I'm too exhausted to think this through anymore or wonder what comes next. Too tired to dwell on the fact that the man I've fallen in love with—twice—hates me.

Tasty sandwiches or not, he *hates me*. Otherwise, I'd be out of this fucking cage. He'd be looking me in the eye, and we'd be *talking* about everything.

And that's the other fucked-up part: I know that if he walked down here and let me out *right now*, I wouldn't run away. I wouldn't slap him or tell him to fuck off and die. I wouldn't run to my father to have him avenge me.

I'd still want to be with Nero.

I'd still want to hold him and be held by him.

I'd still be fucking in love with him, which is just…I don't know. A sign of serious mental issues? Or just plain pathetic?

Footsteps descending the basement stairs pull me out of my thoughts. I wash down the last bite of turkey and Swiss with a swig of OJ as Nero unlocks the basement door and steps in.

"Here to throw more water over me?" I mutter. "You missed your chance last night when I was out."

He doesn't respond, just stands outside the bars in dark slacks and a white button up, the sleeves rolled to his elbows and his arms folded. Watching me, his green eyes glinting ferally.

"Thanks for the food," I mumble. "And the blanket."

He nods, still saying nothing.

Finally, the silence is too much.

"Why am I still in this cage, Nero?" I say quietly.

His jaw sets.

"What do you *want* from me?" I say, a little louder. "Another confession?! I'll confess to whatever the fuck you want, okay?"

His eyes glint. "I've never been looking for a confession, Milena," he growls. "I've been looking for an admission."

I roll my eyes. "Fine! Then let me *admit* to you that—"

“Lose the fucking sarcasm,” he hisses, “and tell me the truth. Not what you think I want to fucking hear,” he snaps. “The *truth*. If you’re even capable of that.”

I stare at him. “The *truth*?! I’ve already *told* you the truth!” I jab a finger at the TV screen. “That video is *fake*! Maybe not the visual, but the audio *damn well* is! I don’t know how the fuck else to say it!” I scream. “When I came there that night to meet you, I had *no fucking idea* that any of that was going to happen!” I choke, tears beading in my eyes. “Nero, I am *so* fucking sorry about what happened to your parents, I can’t even *tell you*! But—”

“You were there that night, Milena,” he snaps. “You showed up in your little mask, played your part, then handed me over to—”

“*Enough*!!!” I scream. “Nero, *I didn’t know*! I thought it was just a night! Just you and me!”

“Don’t lie to me!” he roars. “Don’t look at me like you feel or *ever felt* something for me, and—*”*

“I *do* feel something for you!” I scream, tears pouring down my cheeks now. “I’ve felt something for you this entire time! I felt it before, when it was just us and the notes, before I even knew who you were! I *did not* set you up!!”

His face darkens, his teeth flashing. “Then why were you there!?”

“Because I—”

“WHAT OTHER *POSSIBLE* FUCKING REASON WOULD YOU HAVE BEEN THERE!?”

The force of his roared voice, the sheer rage in his words, sucks out all the air in the room, leaving us in sudden, brutal silence.

I’m shaking as my body stiffens, my eyes locked on him as my mouth falls open.

Because suddenly, all at once, in a way so tragically, brutally painful that it cuts a hole through my heart, I understand.

“Nero…”

I choke his name out, my chest tightening as I slowly walk towards him. He stays where he is, glaring at me, his lips curled into a vicious snarl. I stop when I get to the bars between us, clasping them as I look up into his furious face.

“Why else would you have been there, if not to lure me?” He rasps.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I slowly shake my head, my eyes locked on him. “Do you seriously not consider yourself to be *lovable*?”

The silence hangs in the dank air between us. He blinks, his jaw ticking as he slowly moves closer, until he’s right at the bars. His hands grip them tight as he leers down into my face, his teeth bared.

“*No*,” he chokes. “No, I don’t.”

A sob rips from my throat as I grab his shirt through the bars and pull him close.

“*Well, you are to me.*”

And then I kiss him.

I bang my face on the bars when I do, but I don’t care. I kiss him and cry against his face, clinging to him like he might evaporate or push me away at any second.

But that doesn’t happen.

Suddenly, he’s kissing me back, with a force so powerful that it sucks the air from my lungs. Nero groans, keys jangling, his lips still on mine as he unlocks the door. We pull apart just enough for him to bang it open and surge into the cage. Then I’m choking on another broken sob as he grabs me in his arms and lifts me against his chest, his lips searing to mine in a vicious, consuming kiss.

All I know is his arms and his lips as he carries me out of the basement and up the stairs, all the way to the third floor. I dimly hear water running, but all I really feel is the heat of his body against me and the feverish way I’m clinging to him.

He breaks away from me just long enough to tear my ruined dress from my body. His own clothes are next, then he’s scooping me up again and getting us both settled into warm, sudsy, water.

I moan and go to kiss him again, but he stops me, a broken look on his face, his eyes haggard as he cups my face.

"*Milena*—"

"*It's over*," I choke, crying. "*It's just you and me*—"

"I chained you," he croaks. "I locked you up in the fucking dark in a fucking *cage*—"

"Yes," I whisper, my voice cracking. "And then you came back for me, and we're here now."

His throat works as he stares down at me, chest rising and falling like something's trying to tear its way out of him.

"No," he rasps. "That's not enough."

He brushes wet hair from my face, his hand shaking.

I go to speak, but he stops me with a shake of his head.

"I am so fucking sorry, Milena."

His forehead presses to mine. I feel the heat of him. The tremble in his chest.

"I should've trusted you," he whispers. "I should've looked you in the eye and seen what was real. But I wasn't looking at you, Milena," he chokes. "I was looking at everything I lost, and making *you* fucking pay for it."

"Nero—"

"I wanted to hurt someone for what happened to me," he hisses, his hands shaking as they cup my face. "And you were the only person that I could make bleed. All I could focus on was my pain and my grief and the past," he chokes, "instead of what's right here, right now."

I tremble as he holds me tighter, his eyes two green flames blazing into mine.

"You were right there in front of me, baby. And all I could see were the ghosts."

"You don't have to do this," I whisper, smiling through the tears as I reach out to touch his face. "I forgive you."

But he shakes his head.

"I don't deserve to be."

"Nero—"

"*I'm so fucking sorry, princess*," he whispers, closing his eyes. "For the cage. For not believing you. For hurting you when all you ever did was *love me*."

He takes my hands in his and brings them up to his mouth, our foreheads still touching. My heart melts as he starts to kiss my knuckles, one after the other.

"I'm sorry I wasn't better. I'm sorry I didn't just fucking tell you I loved you—"

"*You don't have to keep saying sorry*," I whisper as I start kissing *his* knuckles.

His eyes meet mine, something flickering in them that I've never seen before.

"Say it again," he murmurs.

My lips curl into a grin.

"Say what?"

"You know what."

"*I love you*."

He buries his face in my neck, holding me tight like he might fall apart without me. I whimper when I feel his lips on my skin and his hands on my body.

A hardness between us.

When I reach for him, he stops me.

“I’m not done apologizing yet. Turn around.”

“You are, trust me—”

“*Turn the fuck around,* princess.”

I giggle.

That's my Nero.

I turn my back to him, holding my knees against my chest. I gasp when I feel warm water sluicing over my head, down my back. When I start to turn again, he stops me with a firm hand.

“Let me do this.”

More water pours over my hair, his strong hands combing through it and pulling it behind me. He says nothing, just tilts my head back, pouring even more water on my hair.

“Nero, what are you…”

I grin when I hear shampoo being squirted into his palms. His hands work the suds into my blonde locks. His fingers massage my scalp, lathering every strand as I close my eyes and sigh contentedly, sinking back against his chest.

He rinses my hair, then does the whole thing again with the conditioner before rinsing it again. Then he soaps and cleans my body, inch by inch, moving with a tenderness I didn’t know he was capable of.

“Lie back,” he growls, pulling me into his chest. He reaches past me, pulls my legs out of the water, and sets my heels on the edge of the clawfoot tub.

“What are you doing?” I murmur lazily.

“This.”

My eyes open in surprise. He's lathering my legs with shaving cream.

My head twists to look at him. “You’re not seriously going to—”

“Would you like me to?”

I chew on my lip, locking my eyes with his.

“And more importantly,” he murmurs. “Do you *trust* me to?”

I frown, like I’m thinking. But it’s really just to fuck with him. Then I giggle and twist my face up to his, kissing him softly. “The answer is yes, and *yes*,” I murmur.

Then I lie back against his chest and watch as quite possibly the most savage, feral, violent man I’ve ever met slowly and methodically shaves every inch of my legs without nicking me once. Stroke by stroke, he cleans the lather and the stubble from my legs, until they’re baby smooth.

“Lift your arms.”

I’m too stunned to even protest as he lathers my armpits and slowly shaves those as well, calmly and methodically.

“Stand up,” he murmurs into my ear.

Yep, *still* too stunned and way too pampered to have a thing to say about any of this. I stand and let him spin me around, settling my butt on the edge of the tub.

“Spread your legs.”

I gape at him.

“*Nero*—”

“Spread your fucking legs, princess.”

I obey in a daze, watching him through a fog of desire and need and love as he moves between them. I shiver when he smooths the shaving cream over my pussy, and tense up as he brings the razor close. Then he cleanly and slowly takes the first stroke.

After that, there’s no nerves at all. I just sit there, watching as he cleans away all the hair, running the razor over me until every inch of my most private place is smooth as silk.

Nero’s eyes darken with hunger as he pours water over my pussy, washing away the last bits of shaving cream. I bite back a whimper, waiting for his tongue as he leans close.

Instead, he does something almost more intimate: he kisses me right above my pussy lips, on the clean, smooth skin.

I’m still staring at him with my mouth hanging open as he pulls back with a lazy grin. Then he starts to kiss down my left leg, trailing his lips against my inner thigh. He moves lower, kissing his way down my calf before he pulls my foot out of the water and raises it up, kissing lower still, toward my ankle.

I panic for a second, and nervously try and pull my foot away.

He doesn’t let me. His grip tightens, pulling my foot all the way out of the water and sitting it on his firm chest.

“*Nero*…” I mumble, turning red and looking away. “Not…my feet…”

He slowly looks up at me. “What?”

“They’re…” I make a face. “They’re ugly,” I mumble. “I mean, I’ve danced my entire life. I have scars and ugly calluses and—”

My breath catches as he lifts my foot off his chest, brings it to his lips, and kisses the arch softly.

“It’s the scars that make them beautiful, princess,” he says quietly. "They're the battle wounds you got in pursuit of your art. Lessons learned in pain and punishment.”

He kisses it again, then sets my foot back in the water before pulling out the other one. I watch with a warm feeling in my core as he kisses it softly, just like the first one.

“For the record, not a single fucking part of you is ugly.”

His lips move up my calf. Up my inner thigh as he sets my foot back in the water. When his mouth finds its way to my pussy, I’m already dripping wet for him.

I moan as he dances his tongue over me, swirling it over my clit and then plunging it deep. My head drops back, my hands sliding into his hair as he licks me slowly and purposefully, teasing me and coaxing me higher and higher.

His lips wrap around my swollen clit, his tongue rolling over it. My moans and gasps fill the bathroom as he sinks two fingers into me, curling them and stroking in and out as he tongues my clit over and over.

Until it’s too much. Until I’m clutching his head tightly and whimpering his name. Until I’m shattering and coming all over his mouth with a wild, choked cry.

He pulls me wordlessly off the edge of the tub. I’m still shaking as I settle onto his lap, his hard, huge cock throbbing against my entrance.

We both moan as I sink down onto his cock, stretched tight around him, my breath hitching at his sheer size. But I keep lowering my body, taking more and more of him until I’m settled against his base.

My forehead against his. My nipples electric against his chest. Our eyes locked.

“*I love you,*” he growls quietly as his muscled arms surround me, his strong hands gripping me tight. “*Let me love you*.”

For once, our sex isn’t madness and darkness, viciousness and brutal pleasure.

This time, we make love.

I ride him slowly, rolling my hips and gliding my pussy up and down his swollen cock. He bites and licks and sucks on my neck…my collarbone…my chest. He takes a nipple into his mouth and swirls his tongue over it, sending me reeling as I grind

on his fat cock and give myself completely to him.

His mouth slides up to my jaw, kissing and sucking before he groans and takes my face in one hand, the other guiding my hips as he kisses me fiercely.

Our tongues dance. Moans entwine and blur, and the world around us slows until the fire inside me explodes.

I come gasping and moaning into his mouth, shuddering against him as my body melts against his. And when I feel him grunt, feel his thick cock pulse as he spills his cum into me, I lose it all over again.

35

NERO

I'VE LIVED A PRIVILEGED LIFE.

There's no denying that. Sure, you can point to the tragic murder of my parents, to the abuse that marred my early teens, and my subsequent issues with intimacy, trust, and guilt.

But shitty things like sexual assault or losing your mother and father can happen to anyone. They can happen to people with *far less* than what I was born into.

Wealth—an obscene amount. Power: also at an obscene level.

Good genetics, a brain that works overtime even when I try to silence it, great friends, good schooling… There are times I'm not sure I deserve any of it.

But of all the privilege that's been heaped upon me, there's one part that I *know*, without doubt, I don't really deserve.

Especially after what I fucking did to her.

It was the middle of the night when I brought her to the bath. By the time we staggered into the bedroom, it was almost dawn.

Milena's been asleep for the last hour, but I haven't slept at all. I've just been lying here with her in my arms, her cheek to my chest.

Looking at her. Wondering how the fuck I got her.

Twice.

I stroke her hair, my other hand clutching her tightly, like I'm afraid the next breeze might blow her away from me.

That sure as shit isn't happening.

Nothing's going to take her away from me.

Eventually, I go to move her off me onto the pillow beside us. Just as I do, she stirs, frowning as she opens her eyes. Her hands instantly clutch at me, a small grin on her lips as she kisses my chest.

"Where do you think you're going?" she murmurs lazily.

"I know this is a house full of creature comforts," I grin, winking. "What with the hot water and dubious electrical system—"

"Not to mention the *cage* in the basement," she grins impishly at me.

"You know, I'd forgotten about that—"

I choke, laughing as she flicks my nipple.

"But the one thing we don't have here is a coffee machine. So I'm going to go down the block and get one."

She groans. "Get one for me too, and I'll let you leave."

"Splash of milk, no sugar," I nod.

She frowns. "Should I be concerned that you know so many little details about me?"

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it,” I grin as I lower my mouth to kiss her.

When I’m dressed, I head outside and walk the block and a half to the nearest Starbucks. I order Milena’s coffee, then get a triple espresso for myself because I’m *beat*. I reach for my phone while I’m waiting, then scowl when I touch an empty pocket.

Shit. Left it back at the house.

Whatever.

“No no, like this.”

I glance up when I hear the barista’s voice before I realize he’s not talking to me.

“Sorry,” a girl with blue hair standing beside him frowns, her shoulders sagging. “I suck at this.”

The guy laughs. “Don’t sweat it. This is why we train you. The trick is to pull the shot first, *then* steam the milk. That way, the espresso settles while you’re frothing milk, rather than the milk getting cold while you wait for the shot.”

The blue-haired girl nods. “Cool, that makes sense. Shot first.”

I’ve barely slept in three days. Still, something she just said tickles my brain.

Shot first.

“It was retaliation. Your family shot first.”

Shot first.

When Milena got home that night, she was told that the Kalishnik Bratva was hitting back at my family as retaliation. That we’d “shot first”.

Except I know that isn’t the case. Not in the “it can’t be true” dramatic sense.

I mean I know goddamn well *it didn’t happen*.

I was fresh out of Knightsblood University back then. Aldo was still my father’s *consigliere*, but I was Dad's right-hand man; the crown prince sitting beside his father the king, learning how to rule the empire.

I knew every in and out of our various businesses. I was friendly with every *caporegime*. I was intimate with every fucking detail of every fucking operation that went down. So when I say “that didn’t happen” in regard to our family starting a war with the goddamn *Kalishnik Bratva*, one of the most powerful Russian families in New York, I mean I know in my very *blood* that it didn’t.

Because I’d have known if it did.

“Grande coffee and a triple espresso?”

I blink at Ms. Blue Hair as she passes me my coffees across the counter.

“Thanks… Actually, hold on. Do you have a phone I could use?”

She looks at me like I’ve got three fucking heads.

“A *cell* phone. I left mine at home, and it’s an emergency.”

“Uh…” She glances at the guy who was just training her, who’s also looking at me like I’m a fucking lunatic.

“You did hear me say *emergency*, yeah?” I grunt. “Fuck it, here.” I yank out my wallet, pull out my Amex black card, and slap it on the counter next to the drinks. “Collateral. If I run off with your phone, there’s literally no limit on that. OK?”

The guy frowns. “Sir, I don’t know what this is—”

“You can use mine.”

My eyes snap to the girl, holding her phone out to me.

“Next employee of the month, right here,” I grin, shoving the Amex card her way before I take the phone. “Relax, I won’t even leave the store.”

I text him a heads up that "unknown" is me. He texts back a burner number.

Kir picks up on the first ring.

“And who might Lenora Crofton be?”

“A very understanding barista,” I grunt. “I don’t have time to shoot the shit.”

Kir takes a slow breath. “And to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

“I need to ask you one of those questions we agreed I’d never ask you.”

I can practically hear Kir's scowl. “Which one, specifically?”

“Who hired the mercenaries that night.”

Kir is silent for a few seconds. “C'mon, Nero. You know as well as I do that we never learned that. Someone powerful, obviously. Wealthy enough—”

“No more games, Kir,” I growl quietly. “No more bullshit. *Who*.”

“I don’t fucking *know*, Nero.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “*Look*,” I snarl. “I understand that sometimes, the business you and I do can put you in a tight spot, given the business you *mostly* do with the higher echelons of the Bratva world.”

He laughs coldly. “I don’t think you understand the half of it.”

“Answer the question, Kir. *Please*.”

He exhales heavily. “You know I can’t do that.”

I grit my teeth. “I think that was an admission that you *do* know.”

“What will it change?” he growls. “What will it give you?”

“More than you know,” I hiss back. “Kir, it’s *important*.”

“So are the vows I spoke when I took my seat at the Iron Table.”

“Ahh, so it *was* a Russian family.”

“Nero—”

“I know it wasn’t Pavel Nikitin or Nikolai Antonov.”

He sighs. “Goddammit—”

“Drazen Krylov?”

“He was still in exile four years ago.”

“Yelizaveta Solovyova.”

Kir growls. “And what the *fuck* problem would Yelizaveta have with your family?”

“Thank you. So, no one on the Iron Table. Let’s move on to the High Council.”

“Nero, I am *telling* you—”

“Not Viktor Komarov. He’s in Chicago...” I muse. “Not Yuri Volkov. My mother played tennis with him a few times, and she and his wife were friendly—”

“*Nero*!” Kir hisses. “Enough!”

“Not Anastasia Javanović—I’d know,” I growl, thinking of Mikhail. “And Gavan Tsarenko seems unlikely…”

I purse my lips.

“That just leaves Marko Kalishnik, doesn’t it?”

My pulse jumps when he doesn’t immediately deny it like he did the rest. We both go quiet for a few seconds.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” I finally hiss quietly.

“You *know* why,” he spits back. Then he sighs heavily. “I don’t know the details.”

“But it *was* the Kalishnik family.”

“*I don’t know the details*—”

“Thank you, Kir,” I growl. “For your help.”

I hang up. Then I give the girl her phone back, take my credit card and coffees, and leave.

There’s a tightness in my chest as I head back to Greymoor. A black cloud shadowing the joy I felt barely fifteen minutes ago.

I know it’s not Milena. I *know that*. But I still have to figure out how to tell her that someone, probably her father, has been lying to her for years.

The fact that there *was* no “preemptive attack” on the Kalishnik family by mine.

The fact that instead of coming after my family themselves, they outsourced the job to mercenaries for some reason.

That’s too many oddities to this entire saga for me, and it points to one explanation: someone, probably Marko, is covering something—

My steps halt suddenly.

“My father was undergoing heavy treatment for cancer when your family was attacked. He was pumped so full of chemo that he was barely conscious.”

“He’s never calls me malyshka. He calls me solnyshka.”

When it hits me, it fucking *hits me*.

Holy shit.

Holy fucking *shit.*

But before I can follow that train of thought, a black van screeches to a stop at the curb next to me. I whirl to run, but four guys come at me from both directions on the sidewalk, surrounding me as the van door opens and three more men jump out.

I drop the coffees and take a swing, snarling as I smash one guy in the face, then whirl to dodge a punch and take out another’s legs.

But there’s just one of me.

They *all* get a taste of me as I’m brought to the ground, kicking and fighting. Then I see stars and my vision blurs as something heavy slams into my temple.

My body goes limp. A black bag is yanked over my head.

Shit.

36

MILENA

I WAKE WITH A START. Sunlight streams over my face, and I blink away sleep as I sit up in bed. I glance around before my eyes land on Nero's phone lying on the beside table. My eyes widen when I see the time: it's fucking *ten*.

I grin and start to snuggle back into the sheets. I'm exhausted, and I clearly needed the sleep. But then a thought hits me, and I bolt back upright.

"Nero?" I call out. I frown as I glance at his phone again. He went to get coffee like five hours ago.

"Nero!"

I slide out of bed, wrapping the comforter around me as I pad out of the room. I poke my head into the bathroom. Empty.

"Hello?"

I check the second floor, then the first. I even swallow the lingering sense of dread as I descend to the basement and check there.

Nothing.

I scramble back upstairs, panic starting to build in my chest. It feels off for him to come back then leave again without saying anything or leaving a note. Besides, his phone is still here.

Said phone suddenly rings, making me jump. Then my eyes land on the screen.

It's his sister, Gabby.

I hit the answer button.

"Asshole!" she's already barking. "Where the fuck have you—"

"Gabby?" I interrupt. "It's Milena, hi."

"Oh—is my brother with you?"

There's a tense note in her voice that makes me shiver.

"Gabby, what's—"

"*Is he with you*!" she screams.

"No," I say quietly. "He *was*. He… He went out for coffee. But that was hours ago, and he left his phone here…"

"*Fuck!*" she blurts, sounding scared.

"Gabby!" I choke. "What the fuck is—"

"I don't know," she replies. "But something's wrong. No one can reach him. Not me, not even Dom."

A cold sensation finger-walks up my back.

"Milena… Where are you, exactly?" she says quietly. "Are you at your house?"

"No, I'm—"

“Are you with your father?”

I frown. “Gabby, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” she chokes. “But two nights ago, your father and like twenty of his men were parked outside our house. And when Nero came home, the two of them had *words*. I don’t know what about, Nero wouldn’t tell me. But…” She takes a shaky breath. “I mean, *Milena*,” she mumbles. “How often is a Bratva kingpin okay with his one and only daughter shacking up with an Italian guy like *my brother*.

That cold sensation creeping up my spine wraps around my throat and pierces into me, slicing toward my heart as I start yanking on some clothes.

“I’m scared, Milena,” Gabby whispers. “Like, *really* scared that—”

“I’m going to get him, Gabby,” I hiss. “Right now.”

37

NERO

LIFE, they say, is pain. At least, I've heard people say that.

But I can say with full authority that there ain't no pain like the kind that gets doled out by a furious Russian guy who thinks you've kidnapped his only daughter.

I mean, *I did*.

But I'm guessing the details of how that whole thing has evolved in the last, oh, twelve hours will mean *fuck-all* to Marko Kalishnik right now.

That is, if I *could* even tell him.

I grunt into the dirty rag stuffed into my mouth, my head wrenching to the side as his fist crashes into my cheekbone. Black spots dot my vision and pain explodes through my face. I swear my jaw dislocates and then slips back into position.

We've been at this for two hours. The punching part, that is.

The first hour was the warm-up round, with only one question. But I couldn't answer him then, just like I can't answer him now, rag or no rag in my mouth.

Answering that one question—"where the fuck is my daughter"—could get her killed, unless I can get Marko alone to tell him everything I've put together in my head. But I doubt that's going to happen.

After the warm-up, I got the full Russian treatment. Waterboarding, to start. Then more waterboarding, this time with vodka. Then a round with a ball pein hammer.

I'm pretty sure the pinky and ring finger on my left hand are broken. At least three of my toes, too.

But now we're at the real fun part where Marko and a few of his men turn me into fucking hamburger meat.

I groan as Marko sinks a fist into my stomach, doubling me over against the binds holding me to the chair. We're in a sub-basement similar to the one at Greymoor where I had Milena.

Glad to see that cosmic irony is still alive and well.

Rurik, that motherfucker Levka, and four other Kalishnik men are clustered to one side of the basement, drinking vodka, smoking cigarettes and smirking every time their boss's fist connects with my body with a wet, fleshy sound.

Marko is getting *into it* with me.

He's in his fifties, his hair silvering at the temples. But the man is built like someone twenty years younger. He's shirtless, and he has the body of a cage fighter, complete with the sort of tattoos that Russians don't *get* outside of prison.

"Where."

He punches me in the jaw again, momentarily blinding me with the pain.

"Is."

I roar a scream into the gag as he stomps on the foot with the broken toes.

"My."

Backhand across the mouth.

“DAUGHTER!”

The last hit is a *motherfucker*. It's so hard that I fall sideways, taking the chair with me as the gag falls out of my lips along with a mouthful of blood.

My head smacks the ground, sending more stars shooting through my blurred vision. It clears *just* in time to see his foot slamming toward me before it catches me in the jaw, sending me and the chair spiraling on the concrete floor.

I’ve taken some beatings in my life. Bad ones. I even temporarily, for reasons that escape me just now, got into the underground ring shit that Roman gets hard for.

But this is…next level.

This is fury incarnate.

And I can’t say a goddamn thing to stop it.

Marko squats down next to me, his face red, sweating glistening on his brow and his thick biceps. He grabs my ear, twisting it sharply as I roar, spitting blood across the floor.

“*Look at me*,” he snarls.

I try to focus on him, but my vision swims in and out.

“*LOOK AT ME!*” he roars, punching me in the nose.

His eyes are like a demon’s as he leers at me, his face a mask of wrath and rage.

“*Tell me*,” he growls, “and we can be done here. Where the *fuck* is my Milena?”

Blood trickles freely from my mouth and pools on the floor beneath my face.

“*She…safe*,” I croak out.

Marko’s lips curl into a snarl. “Safe *where*, motherfucker?!”

“*Safe*…” I mumble.

He glares at me for another three seconds. Then he snarls, lunging to his feet and grabbing me by the hair. He yanks me and the chair up so hard I swear he’s going to tear off my fucking head.

“Rurik!” he barks, still glaring at me. “How’s the vodka?”

Rurik chuckles. “Delicious, boss.”

“I think our guest would like some more.”

Fuck.

I’d heard horrible things about waterboarding: how it mimics the sensation of drowning without giving you the mercy of death. I can say from personal experience now that, yes, it’s *awful*.

…But using vodka is ten times worse.

Water doesn’t sear your flesh. It doesn’t make your eyes want to melt away. It doesn’t fill your lungs with a chemical burn that keeps you nauseous for hours.

And it looks like I’m having seconds.

Rurik walks over a fresh bottle and a towel and hands them to his boss. Then he goes to the other side of the basement and drags a table across the floor, filling the room with an awful grating sound.

I know what’s coming next.

Rurik and another guy lift me and the chair up, flip me onto my back, slam me down on the table, then spin me so my head is hanging over the edge.

Marko looms over me, face lined and eyes menacing as he glares at me.

“Last chance, *ublyudok*,” he snarls. “Where is she.”

We’re still not alone.

I can’t tell him. Not without putting her in danger.

“*She…she’s safe*,” I blubber through bloody lips.

Marko sighs, making a tsking sound. “Too bad. This is good vodka.”

The towel goes over my face. I grunt, squirming against the ropes, but it’s useless. Rurik and the other guy tilt the chair so my head is angled slightly to the floor.

The vodka hits the towel, soaking through it, burning my face as it mimics drowning—cutting off my air, choking my throat, leaving me sputtering and retching, fighting for air that isn’t coming.

When Marko tugs the soaked towel off, I’m gasping like a fish on land.

“Bring him down,” he grunts to his men.

Rurik takes that literally, shoving the chair sideways off the table. I crash to the ground shoulder-first, and the red-hot pain that explodes through me tells me I just managed to dislocate it.

This is *not* going well.

“I think I’ll use the hammer again,” Marko sighs, sounding almost bored.

He yanks me up so that the chair is on all four legs. Then he smiles as he taps one of my yet-unbroken fingers with the ball pein hammer.

“*I’ll tell you where she is*,” I croak, “*if we’re alone*.”

“No, *now,*” he growls. “What have you done with my daughter?!”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, just slams the hammer down on my left middle finger. My eyes roll back, a choked cry of pain strangling in my throat.

“Tell me,” he murmurs, tracing the hammer lightly over the freshly-broken digit and sending new pain exploding through my cortex.

“*She’s…safe*—”

“She *isn’t* safe!” he roars. “Not unless she’s *here*, with *me*, in *my* fucking home!”

The door to the basement swings open, and another of Marko’s men hurries in.

“Sir…” he murmurs, bowing stiffly as Marko turns to him.

“Whatever it is,” Marko growls, “it can wait until I’ve had my fill of this motherf—”

“Sir, she’s home.”

Marko whirls back to the man.

“*Excuse me?*”

“Ms. Kalishnik, sir. She’s upstairs. She’s looking for you.”

Marko drops the hammer. It hits the floor with a sharp clang. He doesn’t even look at me as he bolts from the room.

On the one hand, this is good. She’ll tell him that she’s safe, and that I didn’t bury her in a shallow grave, and impress upon him that he *really* should come back down here and release me.

On the other hand, until that happens, I’m down here with the real threat.

…Who's looking at me like he damn well knows what *I* know as he picks the hammer up off the ground.

Fuck.

That’s the other downside:

I might not *live* long enough for Marko to get back down here.

38

MILENA

PAVEL STARES at me with shock and horror, much like Ivan and Demyon, the two guards at the front door, did when they first saw me like this: barefoot, hair a mess, in a tattered, filthy white dress.

"My *father*," I hiss. "Where is he?!"

"He…" Pavel stammers, shaking his head. "He's in a meeting, Ms. Kalishnik…" He stares at me again. "You are…okay?"

"Back from the dead," I mutter. "And I'm guessing based on the number of men walking around with guns drawn and the general grim tone that my father will be more than happy to be interrupted from his meeting with that news?"

Pavel stiffens. "Of course, Ms. Kalishnik. I'll get him for you."

Just as he's running off, I hear a choked sob behind me.

"Milena!"

I turn and almost fall over as Angelina and Vasilisa crash into me, crying wildly.

"You're alive!" Vasilisa sobs as she grabs me hard enough to hurt a little.

"God in Heaven, Milena," Angelina chokes, staring at me like I'm a ghost. "We thought…" She trails off, crossing herself and kissing the rosary around her neck.

"Your father has been tearing the city apart looking for you!" Vasilisa blurts, pawing at my hair, my dress, her eyes dragging over me with shock and concern. "*Bozhe moy*," she whispers, looking horrified.

"I'm okay, it was all a misunderstanding," I tell them, hugging them before pulling back. My brows furrow. "My father… uhh…" I glance down at my appearance.

"*Come*," Vasilisa urges, grabbing my arm and dragging me through the house. She takes me into the laundry room by the kitchen and immediately starts pulling clean clothes off a rack: leggings, a t-shirt, a hoodie.

I strip off the horror-show of a dress and yank them on before I hug her again.

"*Thank you*," I say quietly. "I'll explain everything," I tell her. "I swear. But first—"

"MILENA!!"

There's no stopping the grin that fills my face when I hear my father's voice.

"Papa!" I scream, bolting from the laundry room as he rushes into the kitchen.

My God.

He looks like he's aged five years in the last three days: his face is haggard and gaunt, with huge bags under his eyes. It doesn't look like he's slept at all.

Curiously, he's shirtless, his torso glistening with sweat.

"*Milena*—!"

We both rush at each other, meeting in the middle of the kitchen as he flings his arms around me and hugs me so tightly it feels

like I'm going to crack a rib.

"*Solnyshka*," he whispers in a ragged, broken voice, hugging me like he'll never let me go. "I thought I'd lost you."

"*Nyet*, Papa," I cry into his sweaty shoulder, clinging to him fiercely. "Never."

We pull apart, his glistening eyes running over me, making sure I'm not hurt in any way.

I'm about to ask him why he's shirtless and sweating when my gaze drops to his hands, holding mine.

They're swollen. The knuckles are bruised.

…And stained with blood.

My heart drops, a cold feeling stabbing into my heart as my eyes drag up to his.

"*Papa*," I whisper. "Where is he? *Where is he*!?"

"Downstairs," he finally growls.

"GET HIM!"

Papa's face darkens as he shakes his head. "No, Milena."

"*Please*!!" I scream. "Before they kill—!"

"No one gets killed in this house without my say-so," he grunts. "What did he do to you, *solnyshka*?" he growls again. "What did that bastard—"

"*Nothing*, Papa," I blurt.

Papa eyes me closely. "You're home now. You're safe. You don't have to worry—"

"He didn't—"

"You were *gone*!" he barks, his voice shaky, his eyes haunted. "You were gone for *three fucking days*! I have been tearing this goddamn city *apart* looking for you! Whatever he did to you, my girl…" He shakes his head. "You don't need to fear him anymore. You can tell me. But do *not* tell me that nothing happened, because I know you, and there's no version of you that would willingly disappear without a trace for three days, knowing what it would do to me!"

My heart breaks. Because he's right, there's no chance in hell I'd ever do that.

It's also so more complicated than that.

"It's…" I take his hands again, bloody or not. "Papa, it's complicated. A lot of it was a huge misunderstanding—"

"A *misunderstanding?!*" he roars. "Yes or no, Milena: did you disappear for three days *willingly*."

I wince, shaking my head. "No, Papa."

His jaw sets. "And is the party responsible for that disappearance Nero De Luca?"

My lip trembles as I breathe in and out slowly through my nose.

"That settles it," he growls quietly. "It's not that complicated after all." He squeezes my hand. "It might be best if you go up to your room," he murmurs.

He starts to turn away, but I grab his hand again, fiercely.

"*Where is he*?" I snap.

"That's nothing you need to concern yourself with, Milena. You've been gone for days. I don't know what that motherfucker did to you, but you are *clearly* not yourself. I understand there can be psychological confusion in situations like—"

"Do you think I have *Stockholm Syndrome*?!" I choke. "Is *that* what you think is going on?!"

"I *know* that's what's going on, *solnyshka*," he retorts. "Milena, I love you more than life itself, but this is clearly *not* a conversation we can have rationally right—"

"I *love him*!!" I scream.

Instantly, the whole world goes quiet. The kitchen stills, the only sound a soft drip of the tap into a pan soaking in the sink.

Papa stares at me like I've stabbed him.

"*Milena*…"

"I love him," I say again. "*And that's nothing new, Papa*," I whisper. "I've loved him for a long time. A lot longer than you know. Than even *I* knew."

His brow furrows in confusion and hurt, his head slowly shaking side to side.

"*You*—"

"Love him, *yes*," I hiss fiercely, seething. "And if you think for one goddamn second that I'm going to *go up to my room* while you charge down to the basement and hurt him, you're out of your fucking mind."

"Milena, my love, I know this is hard, but it's really best if you—"

"I'm not a little girl, Papa!"

"You're *MY LITTLE GIRL*!!!" he roars back.

His face breaks, all the fire in his eyes shattering as he yanks me into a tight embrace. "You will *always* be my little girl. Do you have *any* idea what it felt like the last few days, thinking that someone I loved more than anything might slip through my fingers forever?"

Tears stream down my cheeks as I hug him back.

"*Da*, Papa," I choke. "It's how I feel right now with Nero in that basement."

He breathes quietly, still hugging me. Then he slowly pulls back, his eyes tight as they search mine.

"We need vodka. Now."

He walks over to the wet bar, grabbing a bottle and two glasses.

"Come, sit." He taps the kitchen island with stools sitting around it. "You're right, my daughter," he growls, taking a seat. "You're not a kid anymore. So…" He nods to the stool opposite his. "Sit. Drink with me. We can talk like adults."

"Papa, *where*—"

"*Sit*, Milena," he growls, tapping the counter. "You want to have this adult conversation, we're going to have it."

I glare at him, but then walk over and sit across from him. Papa pours us both splashes of vodka and pushes one toward me.

"Where were you for the last three days."

Fuck it, let's get it over with.

"With Nero. First, I was his captive—"

Papa's eyes flame as his lips curl into a snarl.

"I'm going to *kill* that fucking little—"

"It was a misunderstanding."

"Exactly *how* is something like that—"

"Are we going to have a conversation or are you going to yell at me?!"

Papa mutters some curses in Russian and takes a heavy sip of his vodka.

"Keep going," he finally grumbles, glowering.

"Thank you. I'll get to the misunderstanding in a minute, but yes, I was his captive. Then I…wasn't." I look at him pointedly as

I take a sip of the vodka. “Do you want me to elaborate on that now, or do you have further questions.”

“Oh, we’re not remotely done there,” he mutters. “But yes, I do have *several* more questions.” He eyes me, his mouth thinning. “What happened to Leo Debolsky.”

I wince and look away.

“He’s…dead.”

My father spits another Russian swear. “Did that fucking psycho kill him?!" he bellows. "Do you know how fucking furious his father is?!” He downs the rest of his vodka at once and slams the glass on the counter. “Vladimir Debolsky wants *war*, Milena! Levka has been meeting with him daily since Leo disappeared, making sure this doesn't blow up in our face! Now you're telling me it's because of *us*!?”

“Nero didn't want me falling into the hands of a *predator*!" I fire back.

“*NERO* is the predator, Milena!" Papa roars. “I don’t understand why you’re protecting him! I have every reason to go down there and *bury him*—”

“You do that, and you’ll lose me forever.”

I don’t yell. I don’t scream. But when those words fall truthfully from my mouth, my father goes still and then blinks, like I’ve slapped him.

Silence descends over the kitchen again.

“I think,” he finally says quietly, “that our glasses are dry.”

I smile wryly as he reaches for the bottle and pours us both another drink.

“Papa?”

He smiles quietly as he looks at me. “*Da*, *solnyshka*?”

“May *I* ask a question now?”

He nods. “Of course.”

“What do you know about the conflict our family had with the De Lucas four years ago?”

Papa doesn’t love talking about that time, because he was so close to death.

“You know what happened, Milena. The De Lucas planted a sniper across the street from this house. They *shot* at us,” he frowns. “I was sick, Levka was running things. He responded like a true Kalishnik.”

I swallow, shaking my head. “That’s not what actually happened, Papa,” I say quietly. “There *was* no shot at us. No sniper. No provocation.”

His brow wrinkles. “Milena, you’ve been misinformed—”

“*Papa*,” I say tightly. “I *need you* to believe me on this.”

He frowns. “And on what grounds are you making this claim?”

My mouth thins.

“*Nero*?” he groans. “Because *Nero* told you—”

“If you love me,” I hiss, “and you trust my judgment—”

“*Do I*?” he growls.

I glare at him, and he sighs. “Of course I love you. And aside from *this* mess, yes, I would trust you with my life.”

“Then trust me right now,” I say quietly. “Believe me, and trust that *I* believe *Nero*.” I look at him steadily. “Papa, the De Lucas *didn’t* attack us.”

His face darkens as he picks up his glass and takes a sip.

“What would that mean,” I press, “if the De Lucas *didn’t* attack first, and it was us who started the whole thing.”

Papa’s face is grim. "It would mean terrible things, but that's not—“

“It is, Papa,” I say quietly. “It is *exactly* how it happened. Think about it. Why did we use mercenaries that night?”

He looks up sharply. “We didn’t. This family doesn't use mercenaries to fight its battles,” he grunts.

“We did that night.”

He shakes his head tiredly. “*No*, Milena. Your uncle reached out to the Panachev Bratva for assistance. He and Oleg Panachev were cellmates, back in Russia—”

“Why not use our own people?”

Papa sighs. “Because when you shoot at a king, Milena, you *cannot miss*.” He raises his eyes to me. “If we used our own men, and *missed*, Antonio De Luca would have come for us.” His mouth twists. “Imagine we killed his family, but *he* survived. How do you think your uncle or I could ever sleep again, knowing the target on *you*?” He sips his vodka. “Anyway, Panachev’s men aren’t mercenaries.”

My brow furrows as I reach into my pocket and pull out the little thumb drive that I brought here from Greymoor.

…The one I pulled out of the TV in the basement.

“I need you to see something. Is there a laptop around?”

He frowns. “My office,” he murmurs. “Come.”

He puts his arm around me, leading me upstairs and into his throne room.

“It’s on the desk,” he says, going to the closet and pulling out a dress shirt. He shrugs it on, buttoning it halfway before he walks over to where I’m inserting the drive into the computer.

I click on the lone file, and the grainy video fills the screen.

“Are you ready for tonight?”

“Yes Papa, I’m ready.”

“You’ll make sure he’s at the spot we agreed on?”

“What the fuck is this,” Papa growls next to me.

“I’m as confused as you are,” I mutter back.

“Excellent. If that changes, let me know immediately.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“That’s us…” Papa hisses. “That’s my voice. But I didn’t…” He frowns at the screen

“I’m proud of you, malyshka. Doing what the family needs you to do.”

“Wait. When have I ever called you *malyshka*?”

A grim smile spreads over my lips.

“Of course, Papa. This is what we Kalishniks do. Besides, he means nothing to me. It’s all a means to an end.”

The video ends. Papa looks incredulous and a little unnerved.

“We never had that conversation,” he growls. “I’m *sure* of it.”

“Me too,” I nod. “That *misunderstanding* I told you about?” I gesture to the screen. “See where that might’ve come from?”

“*Nero* had this?”

I nod.

Papa swears in Russian under his breath before he hits the play button again.

“This is our own security footage,” he growls, his eyes darkening. “That's our back garden.” He turns to me. “Where did Nero get this?”

I shrug helplessly. “It was sent to him anonymously—obviously to divide us. It’s you and me talking, but the audio…” I frown. “It’s been faked.”

Papa’s scowl deepens.

“No one has access to our home security footage but myself and Rurik.” He looks up at me. “And Rurik’s loyalty to the family is unquestionable—”

“Boss!”

Speak of the devil…

Rurik barges into the room, his face grim. I take in his disheveled appearance—hair a mess, brow sweaty, shirt unbuttoned halfway with the sleeves rolled up.

Flecks of blood across both the shirt and his fists.

He looks at me, and I can’t help but smile at the way his whole body seems to exhale a held breath.

“*Thank God*,” he chokes as he walks right over to me and hugs me tightly.

There are precious few men in the world who could do that in front of my father and not be summarily shot. That's how close we are.

However that thumb drive got out, it wasn’t Rurik.

He turns to my father, looking grim. “Marko, we've just been hit."

Papa stiffens, his eyes widening. “*What*?!”

“Our distribution warehouse in the South Bronx,” Rurik hisses. “They slaughtered almost everyone and torched the place. NYPD and NYFD are both on site.”

Papa swears viciously. “*WHO*?!” he bellows.

Rurik’s face darkens. “Two of our guys made it out, and IDed the attackers as Vladimir Debolsky's men.”

I whirl to my father. “I thought you said Uncle Levka had been in talks all week with Vladimir to settle a peace!”

Papa’s face tightens as he starts to open his mouth. Then he goes still, his mouth opening slightly as he turns and stares at the video paused on the laptop.

“*Bozhe moy*,” he mutters quietly.

My God.

“Your uncle also has access to the security tapes,” he murmurs.

A chill ripples through my chest as Papa whirls toward Rurik.

“Where is Levka?” he hisses.

“He's still down there,” Rurik growls. "With *him*.”

Nero.

My father turns to me, his face pale and tight. “You love this man? I mean *love*, Milena,” he says. “Not infatuation. Not lust. Do you *love* him*.”*

“More than anything in the world,” I whisper.

Papa flinches just a little. “More than me?”

I smile weakly as I take his hand. “It’s…a close race.”

He nods stiffly. Then he yanks the drawer to his desk open and takes out a gun.

“Are you armed?” He asks Rurik.

Rurik grimaces. “My sidearm is downstairs.”

“Here.” Papa hands him the gun and then pulls another one out of the drawer. Then he turns to look at me, his face lined and grim.

“You’re going to refuse if I tell you to stay here, aren’t you?”

“I’m my father’s daughter.”

He smiles as he puts a hand on mine.

“Just stay behind me, *solnyshka*.”

39

NERO

"Not tapping out on me, are you?"

I grit my teeth as the motherfucker grabs a fist of my hair, yanking my head back and leering down into my face.

"Or are you trying to sleep?" Levka grins, tracing the bloodied tip of his knife across my jugular.

Three of the Kalishnik guards chuckle darkly. The fourth stands to the side, his face grim as he side eyes Levka from behind.

I'm getting the sense that there's some…*confusion* about the hierarchy within the Kalishnik ranks. I'm willing to bet that *most* of the men who work for Marko are loyal to him to a degree not even the Italian mafia can fully understand.

The Bratva is like that. I mean, it's literally Russian for "brotherhood", and they take that shit as law. You don't just work for a *Pakhan*. He's literally your father, leader, and master once you've been brought into the brotherhood.

Except these three fucks, and I'd bet a few more, don't seem to have gotten the memo that it's *Marko* who's in charge—not Levka, even if he sat on the throne temporarily while Marko was in treatment four years ago.

"See?" Levka smirks to his men. "His eyes are closing."

"The only thing putting me to sleep is your fucking voice," I growl. "Blah, blah, fucking *blah*. For fuck's sake, Levka, do you *ever* shut—"

Blood explodes from my mouth and sprays the floor as my head snaps sideways.

Worth it—and for the record, I'm not sleepy. It's just that there's so much goddamn blood running down my face that it's hard to keep them open.

He hits me once. Twice. I grunt as he grabs my hair, bringing the edge of his blade back to my throat.

"As much fun as this is," he purrs, "I think the game has run its course."

"I don't think your brother would be too pleased—"

"What does or does not please my brother is not my concern right now," Levka spits. "Things sometimes get out of control during a torture, *da*? Maybe you tried to escape, and, well..." He shrugs eloquently. "Things happen."

I tense as the blade presses to my jugular.

"*Sir*…" The odd man out—the guard who clearly isn't sucking Levka's dick like the others—steps forward. "Mr. Kalishnik ordered us to leave him be until he returns."

Levka whirls on the man. "What is your last name?"

The guard tightens his stance, but stands tall. "Damaskin, sir."

"And do you know what *my* last name is?" Levka snarls. "Fucking *Kalishnik*."

He backhands the guard, almost knocking him off his feet. The other three snicker as Levka straightens up.

"Next time you question my authority, I'll send men to Russia to kill your fucking mother. Understand?"

The man nods stiffly. "My apologies, sir."

Levka dismisses him with a grunt, turning back to me. “Where were…ahhh, yes.”

The blade goes to my throat again and Levka grins at me.

“I take it you liked my home video,” he rasps.

My body hums with violence as I glare through the dripping blood at him.

“Though you didn’t do what you were supposed to do.” He clucks his tongue. “Never send a pussy Italian to do a Russian’s job. Seems I’ll have to—”

The door to the cinderblock-walled room slams open. Levka whirls, and my eyes widen when Marko storms in with Rurik.

…And she’s right behind them.

Milena.

“NERO!” she screams.

Her eyes immediately go to me, and she starts to bolt past her father toward me.

Marko’s arm snaps out, stopping her instantly.

“*Papa*—!”

“*Stay back*,” he hisses.

Her eyes fly to mine.

Her eyes fly to mine.

I nod.

Stay.

She needs to stay where she is right now, because she has no idea how much danger she’s in just *being* in this room right now.

Marko’s face hardens as his eyes lock onto Levka.

“I’ve just seen a very interesting video, brother.”

Levka frowns. Then he smiles and cocks his head at his brother.

“Oh?” He turns back to me, twirling the knife in his hand. “You missed some of the fun we were having with—”

“I told you to leave him alone until I got back,” Marko says quietly.

Levka turns to him with a shrug. “Come now, brother. You know how these things go. The blood, it gets heated!” He grins. “Remember that time in London, when we were fresh from Moscow? That Chechnyan motherfucker…what was his—”

“What happened the night that Antonio and Natalia De Luca were killed,” Marko growls darkly, his eyes sliding to me. I expect fury and hatred in the eyes of the man who’s spent the better part of the day torturing me.

Instead, I see horror, remorse and sadness.

“What happened the night this man’s parents were taken from him,” he presses.

“What happened?” Levka snorts. “*Vengeance* happened. Those fucking cockroaches had a sniper sitting outside this very house, ready to take you out, or God help us, my sweet niece, your daughter—”

“What *happened* to this sniper, Levka,” Marko continues.

Levka shrugs. “Tortured. Then killed. Then disposed of, in several pieces, to dishonor him in the same way he attempted to dishonor this family.”

“Why wasn’t I told about any of this?”

My eyes dart to Milena, and she turns, her eyes locking with mine.

I'm…not in good shape. I'm battered, broken, and I've lost a lot of blood. But when we look at each other?

I could get up right now and fucking dance.

"If you'll recall," Levka says cautiously, "you were sick and in bed. We even thought we might lose you back then."

"So sick that I couldn't be part of a conversation about the punishment for an attempt on my life? Worse, on Milena's?"

"Brother." Levka sighs. "You put me in charge back then for a *reason*. And as the head of the family—"

"*Acting* head," Marko says tightly. "I wasn't so sick that I couldn't be included."

"Well, I apologize," Levka sighs, smirking slightly. "I should have dragged you from your sick bed into a torture chamber four years ago."

Marko's eyes narrow.

"Tell me, Levka—why did we use mercenaries to go after the De Lucas?"

Levka shrugs. "As you always say, when you shoot at a king, you cannot miss."

The room goes silent. Marko's eyes spark.

"So," he growls. "They *were* mercenaries."

Levka frowns, realizing he's fucked.

"They—they were Oleg Panachev's men," he says hastily. "Again, as you say, we wouldn't want to use our men in case—"

"Oleg Panachev, who has since moved operations back to Russia," Marko says.

Levka's jaw works. "Well…yes."

"I thought you were agreeing with me before that they were mercenaries," Marko growls.

His brother sucks his teeth, his brow furrowing. "I was—confused," he sighs after a few seconds, blowing air through his lips. "It's been a long week, Marko, what with Milena being taken by this piece of shit…"

He turns and kicks me hard in the shin.

"*Stop it!"* Milena hisses, taking a step toward me.

Levka sighs. "*And* the warehouse attack by that snake Debolsky." He tsks again. "My head is in many places, brother."

There's a dramatic shift in the room. Suddenly, Marko is no longer questioning what I already know. I think he's just realized his suspicion is entirely correct.

"Rurik," Marko says quietly. "Who knows about what happened tonight with Debolsky and our warehouse?"

"Just you, your daughter, and me," Rurik grunts. "No one else."

Levka scowls. "Of course I know too!" he snaps. "My men texted me while you were all upstairs!"

Marko's nostrils flare. "There's no service down here, brother. That's intentional. Rurik didn't even hear about the warehouse until he came up to find me and check in on Milena and got service again."

Everything goes quiet.

There's a moment right before a storm breaks over the world. A frozen second in time as the clouds roil and surge, as the electrons gather and ignite. A tick of absolute stillness right before the thunder clap and the crack of lightning that splits heaven in half.

That's what the next three seconds are: a frozen, still moment.

And then comes the storm, like hell unleashed.

Everything explodes at once.

Levka draws his weapon, and swings the barrel of the gun right to my face in slow motion.

The rest of the room is pure chaos as literally everyone else except Milena and I draw guns and start screaming at each other.

But I'm not looking at any of that. I'm not even looking at Levka.

I'm looking at Milena.

I'm looking at the woman I love, because if this is the end, I want her face to be the last goddamn thing I see on this Earth.

Marko is roaring at his brother to lower his fucking gun. Levka is yelling back that I'm a fucking bastard, that Marko is being swayed by his daughter's emotions.

She bolts as the screaming and yelling hits its crescendo, shoving away from her father and Rurik and sprinting toward me.

I watch in slow motion as Levka catches the moment, his eyes widening and his mouth opening in a slow-motion yell as he yanks his gaze back to me.

His hand tightens around the gun—

"*NO!*"

Suddenly, Milena is between her uncle and me, blocking my body with hers, Levka's gun pointed right at her chest.

"If you're going to shoot him!" she screams, "you'll have to do it *through me*!!"

"LEVKA!!"

Marko's face twists with horror, and his gun swivels, trained right on his brother.

"LOWER YOUR FUCKING WEAPON!" he bellows.

Levka eyes Marko coldly.

"*You do not have what it takes, brother*," he hisses, the gun still aimed at Milena.

It feels like a high, whining alarm sound begins to ring in the back of my mind. Like anxiety incarnate, slowly growing louder and louder, until it's thundering like a jet engine in my ears.

"To lead takes the will to do *terrible things*, brother," Levka rasps. "And you, Marko, *lack* that will."

"*I swear to Christ, Levka!"* Marko roars. "If you do not lower your gun, I will put this whole fucking clip through your head!"

Levka grits his teeth, his eyes on Milena. "*Move, malyshka*."

"No," she snarls. "Not a fucking chance. I told you: if you're going to shoot him, you're going to have to do it through—"

"So be it."

I'm vaguely aware of a roar tearing from my throat as a gun goes off like thunder.

But it's Levka who cries out, jerking sideways and spinning around as blood erupts from a hole in his shoulder.

That's when all hell *really* breaks loose.

It's Marko who's just hit Levka. But even as he does that, the three other guards start firing.

Marko, Rurik, and the fourth man shoot back.

But fuck all that.

With a scream of pain I lurch to my feet despite the broken toes, the smashed fingers, the blood in my eyes, the fact that I'm still tied to the fucking chair.

I ignore all that and crash into Milena, knocking her to the ground and landing on top of her.

She screams, clutching at me and curling into a ball as the deafening gunfire thunders through the concrete room, dust and blood and sparking ricochets spraying everywhere before it all suddenly goes still.

I can barely hear shit over the ringing in my ears, can barely see through the concrete dust as I grunt and roll off Milena.

Holy fuck.

Everyone's down.

Levka is writhing in a pool of his own blood, staring at the ceiling. The three guards who were loyal to him are all dead with holes in their heads. The fourth guy, Damaskin, is also down and unmoving.

Rurik looks like he's looking death in the face, lying on his side, his hands pressed to two holes in his chest.

But it's her father, slumped against a wall, clutching a wound to his stomach, that Milena bolts to.

"*Papa*!" she sobs, holding him close, her face a mask of agony. "Papa, hold on!"

There's movement in my peripheral vision. My eyes swivel sideways, and I stiffen when I see Levka slowly reaching for the gun by his outstretched hand.

"*Milena*..."

My voice is gone, either from roaring earlier, or the beatings, or maybe the gallon of vodka that got poured over my face. Regardless, I can't speak, and Levka is inches away from that fucking gun.

Pure adrenaline explodes through my body. Maybe it's the last surge of energy I'll ever feel.

…Maybe I don't give a fuck, so long as it means keeping her from harm.

I flex, straining at the ropes as pure pain surges through my whole body. My vision cuts in and out. Blood leaks into my eyes.

I keep pulling. Keep wrenching. Keep fighting.

For her.

My shoulder is *definitely* dislocated—numb, pulsing with raw pain, and my arm on that side is limp.

But right now, that's actually an advantage.

I twist, gritting my teeth as searing pain almost takes my consciousness away. The ropes slip, greased by blood and sweat. My eyes roll back and agony threatens to drag me into the darkness.

…Just as my arm slips free.

Limp, but *free*.

And I only need one.

Milena is still cradling her father. She doesn't see Levka inching toward the gun.

I get my feet under me, trying to stand up with the chair still tied to one arm and around my ribs. But just as I'm finding my footing in the pool of slick blood, Levka's fingers curl around the gun.

No.

"There's a new king of this empire," he rasps as he swings the gun around and aims it right at Milena. "And he has no need for a princess."

I kick my feet, hurling myself across the room with a roar, throwing my whole body at Levka.

I crash into him, sending his shot into the ceiling before I go toppling over him and land with a sickening crunch on the ground.

My vision dims.

My pulse slows to a crawl.

That was it. That was the last I have inside me.

It's only then, when my eyes struggle to focus, that I realize something horrible.

…It wasn't enough.

Levka groans, blood flowing from his bullet wound and the gash in the head I just gave him. But he still gets to his feet, stumbling toward me like a drunk.

His foot slams into my face, spinning me around to face a screaming, sobbing Milena.

I hear the dull metallic click of a hammer being drawn, and my eyes swivel up to see Levka standing over me, pointing a gun at my face.

I'm so fucking sorry, Milena.

I tried.

I love you.

"Yes, there is a new king," he snarls, swaying unsteadily on his feet. "And he has no need for a prince carrying a grudge, either."

BANG!

Three things happen at once:

A gun fires.

Milena screams.

And Levka grunts as blood explodes from his chest.

The gun falls from his hand as he drops to his knees, toppling to the floor.

"It would seem I missed the fun."

What the actual fuck.

I roll my bleary gaze toward the doorway, where Kir is standing, in a goddamn *suit*, a smoking gun in his hand.

"Papa!"

I roll my head the other way, a faint smile touching my lips as I watch Milena help Marko up, his face grim and his teeth gritted as he holds his bleeding abdomen.

He glances at Kir and nods curtly. Kir nods back, then calmly walks over to where Levka is pathetically squirming on the ground in a rapidly growing pool of blood, still trying to reach for his gun.

Kir aims at him, but then a voice stops him.

"*No*, Kir," Marko hisses, blood trickling from his mouth as he staggers over and puts a hand heavily on Kir's shoulder. "Let me."

Kir dips his chin graciously. "My pleasure."

He hands over the gun. Levka's eyes go wide, blood bubbling from his mouth as he stares haggardly up at Marko.

"*Brother*—"

"*No one*, and I mean *NO ONE*," Marko roars, "points a gun at my daughter."

There's zero fanfare as he pulls the trigger, sending Levka to hell and his brains splattering all over the floor.

"*Nero*!"

I'm swimming in and out of consciousness as Milena rushes to me and falls to her knees, sobbing. She yanks the blood-slicked ropes, ripping them off and then clutching my body to hers.

Her hot tears fall across my face. I just smile as I inhale her scent.

Feel her warmth.

Listen to her heart thudding against mine.

“Rurik,” Marko grunts. “Are we dead yet?”

Rurik chokes out a raspy, wet laugh. “Not yet, boss.”

Marko winces, grimacing as he turns to Kir.

“Well,” he groans. “This is a surprise.”

“*What*…” Milena’s brow furrows as she stares incredulously at Kir. “*What* are you doing here?”

Kir sighs, glancing at me. I shrug. He nods, then turns his gaze back to Milena.

“I seem to have a terrible habit of not wanting to see my nephew killed.”

40

MILENA

RURIK GRUNTS, helping me lower Nero onto the couch in the living room as Vasilisa frets and Angelina starts sorting through the first aid kit.

I glance at Rurik, my heart pounding as my face caves a little. There's holes in his suit, leaking blood. Yet somehow, he's helped me carry Nero up here.

He grimaces as he rips his dress shirt open, revealing the flak vest underneath it.

"Doesn't work as well as it's supposed to when the bullets come from five fucking feet away," he grunts.

He shrugs off his jacket and shirt, undoing the velcro on the vest and tossing it aside to reveal two *horrible* welts where the bullets hit. One actually went *through* the vest that slowed it down. Rurik makes a face as he grabs the back end of the slug between his thumb and forefinger and yanks it out of his pectoral muscle with a grunted curse.

"I'm fine, Milena," he smiles before glancing down at Nero. "Take care of your lunatic here."

He smirks at Nero, then puts a hand gingerly on his good shoulder.

"You did good, De Luca," he growls. "And thank you for protecting her."

"You're welcome for saving your ass, too." Nero grins a bloody smile at him.

Rurik rolls his eyes and walks over to help Angelina get Papa to *sit the fuck down*.

I sink onto the edge of the couch, my face crumpled.

"*I'm so sorry*," I whisper, lightly cupping the side of Nero's face.

He just grins at me, shaking his head. "For what."

"For my family," I groan.

"It'll definitely make for some interesting Thanksgiving dinners," he grunts.

I groan again.

"Hey, princess?" he murmurs, his voice raspy and hoarse.

My lips curl. "Yes?"

"I know I'm a mess right now," he croaks. "But I'd really like to fucking kiss—"

I slam my mouth to his, making him grunt, not even caring if it hurts when I do.

Pretty sure he doesn't, either.

"Drink?"

I pull back from Nero and see Kir's brow furrowing as he looks at my father. Papa is completely ignoring Angelina and Rurik's attempts to get him to sit so they can, you know, address the small problem of the *bullet hole* in his body.

"Marko, you've been *shot*," Kir says patiently, like we didn't just all experience utter hell downstairs, which is still a complete bloodbath.

“Yet—here I am,” Papa crows. “Still standing. Still Russian. So, *again*, Kir, would you like a drink.”

Kir starts to shake his head, but Papa holds up a hand.

“It was a rhetorical question, Kir. Right now, we drink.”

“Papa,” I sigh, shooting him a look when I grab his attention. “Will you please stay still so Angelina can patch you up until the doctor arrives?”

He grins at me. “Not the first time I’ve been—”

“*Sit*, Papa,” I snap.

Papa sighs heavily. “*Fine*,” he grumbles, dropping heavily into his office chair with a grimace. Rurik helps him with his shirt, undoing it to reveal the wound as Angelina, who used to be a nurse, kneels down to start cleaning and dressing it.

“I believe this was a ricochet, Mr. Kalishnik,” she frowns, peering at his stomach. “Otherwise you’d have a much bigger problem on your hands.” She glances up at him. “I think I can get the slug out, unless you’d prefer to wait for the doctor—?”

“I’d prefer to not have a bullet in my gut, Angelina,” Papa sighs, smiling at her with a touch of pain in his eyes. “If you wouldn't mind.”

Angelina gets to work as Papa nods at Kir.

“I’ll have that drink now, Nikolayev.”

Kir glances my way. I sigh. “Sure. He's going to have one anyway.”

He smiles and walks over to the bar cart near the wall, pouring two glasses of vodka. “Anyone else?”

“*Fuck yes*,” Nero rasps, wincing as he raises a finger. “Right here.”

“The hell you are,” I scowl at him.

“You understand that I’m in a *considerable* amount of pain, yes?”

My eyes soften as they drag over him. “What hurts?”

“*Everything*,” he chuckles hoarsely.

“Nero.”

We glance over to my father sitting in his chair, looking at us. His mouth is grim.

“You saved my daughter’s life. After I beat you to a pulp and broke your fingers and toes.”

My eyes bulge. “*Excuse me*!?”

“Easy, princess,” Nero groans. “I’ve already put myself in his shoes. I definitely had it coming.”

“I owe you an apology,” Papa continues, grimacing when Angelina yanks the slug from his wound. “To both of you,” he says quietly. “For all of it.” He turns to Kir. “Where are we with that vodka, anyway? One for Mr. De Luca, too,” he grunts.

“Exactly when did I become the bartender,” Kir mutters. “Anyone else?”

Screw it.

“I’ll take one,” I sigh.

“I will when I'm done here,” Rurik grunts, holding Papa’s wound shut as Angelina starts giving him some stitches.

“Fuck’s sake,” Kir growls. “Is anyone *not* drinking?”

“I’ll stick with tea, thank you,” Angelina says quietly, focused on sewing Papa up.

Vasilisa, who doesn’t drink at all, shakes her head as she comes back into the living room with a stack of clean towels.

Kir pours the drinks as I take a towel, wet it with antiseptic, and start gently cleaning the blood from Nero’s face.

“Still gonna love me if I scar up and get all not pretty?” Nero grins lazily at me.

“You might be stuck with me for a long time,” I shrug. “I think I might have Stockholm Syndrome.”

“You just get wet for a guy who saves your life,” he grins.

“*Stop it*,” I mutter, grinning at him and blushing fiercely, thanking *God* that it would appear no one else heard him with his voice so trashed.

“I’m right, though. Right?”

I roll my eyes.

Kir walks over and hands us two glasses. I pass one to Nero as Kir goes back to the bar cart, then he pours two more for Rurik and Papa and takes them over.

“So,” he growls quietly. “Anyone have anything they want to talk about?”

“Uh…” I glance at Nero and Kir. “Yeah, I’ve got…you know, a hundred.”

Kir looks at Nero, his brow arched, asking a silent question.

“Why not,” Nero murmurs. “Fucking cat’s out of the bag anyway.”

Kir takes a sip of his drink.

“I grew up thinking it was just my sister Polina and I,” he says quietly. “When I got older, after my parents had died, she and I found out we actually had a half-sister—a daughter our mother had had with an Italian man here in New York before she and my father met. My mother was barely eighteen when she had the baby, and had no family or safety net of her own. So it was the father’s mother who raised that little girl.” He glances at Nero. “Her name was Natalia Crivello. She became Natalia *De Luca* when she married Nero’s father, Antonio.”

My heart lurches and my eyes go wide as they dart to Nero’s. He grins, lifting his good shoulder with a grimace before twisting his head toward my father.

“Does me being a quarter Russian ease the pain a bit, Marko?”

Papa chuckles quietly as Angelina secures the bandage around his abdomen. He lifts his glass to Nero in a toast. “It just might.”

“What I want to know,” Rurik says, standing and rolling his neck before taking a swig of vodka, his eyes locked on Kir, “is exactly how you managed to walk in at the perfect time.”

Kir’s expression doesn’t give much away, but I catch the hint of smugness there.

“When Marko reached out for my help after Milena went *missing*…” He glances at me significantly. “Well, let’s say I had a hunch.” His eyes swivel to Nero. “So I watched this one, and when the eyes and ears I had on him told me he’d been snatched off the street by masked men speaking Russian…” He shrugs. “Well, I put two and two together, and assumed—correctly—that he’d been brought *here* for some fatherly justice.”

“Thank you,” Papa says seriously, looking up at him and raising his glass. “Truly.”

Kir nods, tapping his glass to Papa’s. “Any time, my friend.”

I shake my head. “But…Uncle Levka…” My eyes meet Papa’s. “I don’t understand.”

“Unfortunately,” he growls, “I think *I* do.” He takes a drink, then sighs. “Levka is…was…the type of man who always wants more control but shouldn’t ever have it. A man who *wants* that sort of power is the last one who should ever wield it. Me?” He shrugs. “I hate being in charge. Which is why I’ve done well *being* in charge. I carry it like a weight, not a crown.” He exhales heavily. “Levka, though, desired that sort of power. And I’ve always known that. I was reluctant to let him take control when I was sick four years ago, but I had no other choice.” He shrugs. “There was Rurik—”

“Not a fucking chance, boss,” Rurik grunts. "Told you that at the time."

Papa smiles quietly. “Indeed. So, my brother it was. And after he got a taste of being in charge, he liked it a bit too much. Even when I’d recovered, it was almost awkward when I had to demand it back from him.”

Rurik frowns. “And Vladimir Debolsky?”

Papa spreads his hands. “I would assume what was actually happening the past week is not Levka trying to make peace with the Debolsky family so much as create an alliance.”

Kir nods. “I’ll know more after my spies report back to me, but I think it’s safe to assume that Levka saw a new route to power through sharing it with Vladimir. Levka would remove Marko from the equation, and in exchange, Vladimir would join their empires together.” He smirks. “Though, based on what I know about Vladimir, I believe Levka would have found himself with a proverbial and literal knife in his back the second he went down that road.”

“So we need to prepare for war with Debolsky?” Rurik mutters under his breath.

Papa shakes his head. “Vladimir is a weak man. The only reason he was bold enough to make that play today with the warehouse is that he assumed Levka had already started taking control.”

Kir frowns. “I’m confused why they’d go after the warehouse, if the plan was to ally. Why destroy that, and the contents?”

Papa sighs heavily. “Because my brother was a very petty man,” he huffs. “We took that warehouse in a small skirmish war with the Albanians maybe six or seven years ago. Levka had control of the offensive, and the victory was his. But then he wanted the warehouse and its logistics for himself. He wanted to run his own operation.” He snorts. “I told him no, put another of our top captains in charge, and that was that.”

“And your brother never forgot it,” Nero murmurs.

Papa nods. “*Da*, exactly.”

“Your brother might have had more people within your organization on ‘his side’ than you know, Marko,” Nero adds. “Three of those guards downstairs were definitely *his* men, not yours.”

My father nods grimly and glances at Rurik.

“Already on it,” Rurik rumbles.

Just then, Vasilisa comes rushing in with two women and a man in hospital whites, wheeling a cart full of medical supplies and equipment.

Kir glances at my father as the doctors begin to get to work, then firmly takes Papa's vodka away as they start to examine the dressing that Angelina applied.

“I think it’s time I left, Marko.”

My father looks up at him over the doctors. “Thank you again, Kir. Truly.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Kir walks over to where I’m sitting with Nero.

“He’s a pain in the ass and there’s definitely a screw or two loose,” Kir smiles, tapping his head as he nods at Nero. “But he’s a good kid.”

“Fuck you too, uncle,” Nero grunts as a doctor gets to work on him.

Kir’s dark eyes drag back to me. “Take care of him, will you?”

“I’ll do my best.”

He smiles. “I know you will.”

When they realize how well Angelina has already dressed Papa’s wound, and exactly how fucked up *Nero* is, the whole medical team switches from Marko to him.

I’m pushed aside as they get to work, stitching, cleaning, setting finger bones, getting his shoulder back into its socket.

It’s two hours later when Rurik, two of my father’s men and one of the doctors carry Nero upstairs and—at my request—bring him to my bedroom.

When they're gone, I gingerly slide onto the bed next to him, propping myself up to look down into his gorgeous green eyes.

He starts to laugh, grimacing in pain as he does, but the chuckle just keeps coming.

"What exactly is so funny?"

His lips curl. "I've been in this room a dozen times, and that's literally the first time I came in through the doorway."

I roll my eyes, grinning myself as he chuckles and winces.

When he's gotten that out of his system, he turns to me, a bruised, stitched brow arched.

"Well?" he grunts. "How bad is it?"

"Honestly? Pretty hideous," I shrug.

"Yeah, but I've still got a *great* fucking dick. So there's that."

I laugh, my eyes locking with his.

"Hey, princess?" he murmurs.

I grin. "Yes?"

"I know I'm a mess right now. But I'd really like to fucking kiss—"

"Yeah," I frown. "You've already used that line."

"Oh good, then we've already practiced what comes next."

His hand reaches up and tangles in my ponytail as he tugs me down. Our lips crush together as his devour mine.

Like his prey.

Sweet damnation and oblivion.

And pure, lovely madness.

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I'm not actually sure what compels me to write this. You didn't ask a question this time, and I don't really have anything to add to what you said.

Except...I do. Obviously.

I've been thinking about this for a while. Probably longer than I want to admit. And maybe I should've fought it harder—kept it buried, ignored the way my brain keeps circling back to you, over and over again.

Like gravity I can't escape.

But here it is:

I've fallen for you.

I love you.

Not the idea of you. Not the mystery of you. You. Your sarcasm, your passion, the way you care so fucking much about things even when you try to armor yourself in this charmingly romantic nihilism.

The sharp things inside you. And the soft things you keep buried under them. I've fallen for both.

But here's the thing: you don't have to worry about this making anything weird, because I'm never giving you this note.

Trust me, you don't want me to love you, just like you don't want to love someone like me.

But I'm going to keep this for myself, tucked in a back pocket, so to speak, to remind myself of the time I felt completely like myself, without any of the bullshit.

To remind myself what I'm capable of being.

I can't wait to meet you in a few days.

Love,

-Nero

EPILOGUE

NERO

Three Months Later:

"FIGHT?" The Bull growls at Lorenzo Capulli, the Gaitano Mafia family *capo* that we've just found guilty of trying to murder his boss rather than uphold a blood marker he signed ten years ago. "Or *flight*?"

The four of us still up on the dais lean slightly forward. I glance over and see Carmine tapping his fingers on the table in front of us. Nico, beside me, rolls his neck and cracks his knuckles. I know that's his "tell" that he's *dying* for a cigarette.

Naomi's busting his balls to quit, though, so I make a note to find his pack before he does and flush them when we end this thing.

Past The Bull's empty seat next to me, The Stag watches in that utterly cool and—not gonna lie—kinda creepy way he has, just *staring* like a fucking psycho.

I twist my gaze back to watch as Lorenzo makes his choice.

He glances nervously to the mouth of the labyrinth, then swallows and looks back to the instruments of death laid out on the table.

"Fight," he spits.

I grin. *Good*. I could use a little blood sport this evening.

The Bull nods, his shoulders bunching like he's excited. I mean, to be fair, he *is*. I like blood and violence as much as the next guy, but The Bull fucking *lives* for that shit. I'm pretty sure his dick gets hard when he punches motherfuckers in the face and breaks bones.

"Choose your weapon," The Bull says. He's doing an admirable job of keeping the excitement out of his voice. But I still catch the glint of glee.

Lorenzo's eyes sweep over the chains, knives, hammers, swords, even the maces, before they finally stop.

"*Those*," he says confidently, pointing.

My heart sinks.

No.

Fucking *no*.

You prick, are you shitting me?

The fucking guy just picked *dueling pistols*.

Goddamned.

Motherfucking.

Cock-sucking.

Dueling pistols.

The Bull cocks his head to the side. "You're sure?"

Lorenzo grins. "Top ranked all-state New York marksman in high school, full scholarship to Colorado State on it, and I was pre-Olympic for the US team." He looks *smug as fuck* as he shrugs. "Yeah, I'll stick with those, thanks."

The Bull is still for a second. I can practically hear his jaw grinding. Finally, he exhales loudly and turns to glare up at the dais.

"Wolf," he growls loudly.

My pulse jumps as he steps back up onto the dais.

"I'm not squaring off with that fucker," he mutters. "You want it?"

"*Fuck yeah*," I grin, jumping to my feet.

"Try not to let your boner show on the way down," Nico mutters. I flip him off and jump off the dais. Then I pick up the pistols, checking them for a single shot each before I walk over to Lorenzo.

"You seem confident."

He smirks. "Little bit."

I smile coldly, even though he can't see it through my mask.

We'll see, fucker.

Two guards escort him over to the center of the stone circle. We stand back to back as The Stag stands and reminds us we'll be taking ten paces each and then turning to shoot.

My blood pumps hot. My skin tingles with the thrill.

Motherfucking DUELING pistols, baby!

"One."

We each take a step.

"Two."

We keep going as The Stag counts—three, four, five, six, seven—my blood roaring in my ears as my finger wraps around the trigger.

"Eight."

I grin wider.

"Nine."

Hell to the fucking yes.

"Ten."

I'll give him this, Lorenzo *is* a quick draw. And I bet he's a great shot, too.

Or would have been, if he'd had time to pull the trigger before my shot ripped through his forehead.

Am I a better shot than fucking pre-Olympic all New York, blah blah fucking guy?

Probably not.

But when you're fueled by pure determination and the *dick-hardening* thrill of getting to use those fucking dueling pistols, *finally*?

The sky's the limit.

There's no post-trial meeting tonight. So when they drag Lorenzo's corpse away, the onlookers begin to murmur and laugh,

changing from spectators to partiers.

Stag lands a hand on my back. “Nice shot,” he growls. He nods at the crowd, mostly the women who are already in various states of undress. “Joining us?”

I give him a look. “What do you think?”

He chuckles. “I think I’ll be seeing you another time. Hi to Milena for me.”

“Indeed. I’ll be *sure* to tell her the anonymous psycho with the fucking antler mask says hello.”

I say a quick goodbye to the rest of them, then I’m out through one of the secret side doors, leaving the underground cathedral behind and heading home.

Well…sort of.

* * *

TECHNICALLY, Greymoor isn’t home *yet*. But it will be eventually, maybe in year or so, when the extensive renovations are complete.

For now, we like to sleep here every so often, imagining what it’ll be like.

It’s late, and when I lock the front door behind me, the house is dark. I walk past the architectural drawings tacked to the walls and the surveying equipment the engineer left, then head all the way to the top, to Lady Greymoor’s *boudoir*.

I hope she doesn’t mind that we’ve commandeered it.

Milena’s dance bag is packed and sitting in the hallway just outside the bedroom. Right. She’s got a super early call time tomorrow.

I slip into the room quietly, peeling my clothes off as my eyes roam over her, asleep in bed—blonde hair loose around her shoulders, the faint light from outside painting across her face.

God, she’s beautiful.

Naked, I slip into bed behind her and wrap my arms around her body.

Good. She’s naked, too.

Instantly, because fucked if I can control myself around her, my cock swells and pushes, thickening against her ass.

I want to wake her. Or maybe play with her in her sleep.

Finger her pussy, run my dick over her lips, then push inside—just the head, for a little bit. Or maybe come on her tits.

You know, nothing crazy.

But just as I consider that she told me several times today about her early morning, her voice breaks the silence.

“You going to fuck me with that gorgeous cock, or just rub it against me?”

I grin.

“I was actually contemplating fucking your mouth while you sleep and painting your face with my cum. Possibly your pussy.” I shrug. “Maybe both.”

She giggles as she turns in my arms to face me. “Does it ruin it if I’m awake when you do it?” she teases.

God, I love this woman.

“I’d say that that makes it even better.”

“Well,” she purrs, reaching down between us and wrapping her small fingers around my rock-hard cock, “in *that* case—*hnnng*…”

She loses her words I sink two fingers into her. She moans when I kiss her, rolling her onto her back and settling between her legs.

Our eyes lock in the darkness, green against blue, and my mouth crushes to hers, stealing her breath.

Darkness meeting darkness.

The French have a saying: *folie à deux*. It means “shared psychosis" or "shared delusional disorder". Maybe that’s us.

Crazy meeting crazy.

Lunacy blending with lunacy.

A shared madness.

Or maybe it’s just called love.

* * *

The Darkest Dance series continues with Kir’s story in *Dance of Devils*.

Haven’t gotten enough of Nero and Milena?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser: https://BookHip.com/SZLBANR

This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Dance of Madness*. But this extra hot “follow-up” story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

DANCE OF DECEPTION

Thank you so much for reading *Dance of Madness*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Jagger Cole universe continues with Kir's story in *Dance of Devils*. If you'd like to catch up on some of the other characters mentioned in this book, though, you can also dive in to *Dance of Deception*, Carmine and Lyra's story. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

Fair warning: bring your running shoes…

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Dance of Deception*.

* * *

Chapter 1
Lyra

Ballet isn't art. It's war disguised as grace.

"Again."

Every muscle in my body is on the point of collapse, but Madame Kuzmina doesn't care. She sits in her seat, dead center, four rows back from the stage, watching us like a hawk from the shadows beyond the lights, her fingers steepled under her chin.

Vaughn exhales sharply beside me, his jaw clenched. Brooklyn doesn't bother holding back her groan. She collapses forward, hands on her knees, sucking in air like we've just run a marathon.

"We've done it four fucking times already," she mutters under her breath.

Madame Kuzmina raises a single hand, glittering with rings, in a regal motion. She doesn't need to raise her voice. Her stare alone is enough to suffocate.

"And now you will do it a fifth," she says quietly in her Russian-tinged accent, "because the fourth was fucking *garbage*."

Vaughn and I exchange a glance. His crystal blue eyes flicker with amusement, but I don't return the smile. I'm too exhausted.

There's no crying in baseball. And there sure as *shit* isn't any smiling in ballet.

Brooklyn straightens with a sigh, smoothing a hand over her leotard. "Fifth time's the charm?" she mutters.

We begin again, running through the *pas de trois*. My mind goes blank the way it always does when I dance—nothing but the music and the movement. Vaughn's hands on my waist, firm but controlled, lifting me effortlessly. Brooklyn spinning into position beside us.

We run through the *entire* thing again before hitting our end position perfectly, Brooklyn and I on either side of Vaughn, and for

the first time tonight, Madame Kuzmina doesn't tell us to do it again.

Instead, she nods.

Once.

"That will do. For now."

I hide the relief washing over me in a wave. Vaughn lets go of our hands with a dramatic groan, then flops onto his back at center stage, staring up at the ornate ceiling.

"Ballet is a fucking disease," he announces to the air.

Brooklyn rolls her eyes and nudges his leg with her foot. "At least you get to wear flats."

"Trust me, princess, you do not want to see me on pointe."

Despite my exhaustion, I smile. Vaughn is chaos wrapped in infuriatingly incredible talent. When he's dancing, he moves with an effortless grace. Off stage he's all sharp edges and wild energy, a stray dog that's never been fully domesticated.

Madame Kuzmina rises to her feet, rearranging the silk draped over her arms. "We begin again at nine tomorrow. Arrive warmed up and ready to go."

With that, she wraps her shawl around herself like Maleficent's robes and melts up the darkened aisle of the Mercury Opera House, disappearing into the shadows. There's a brief flicker of light as the door to the lobby opens and then closes again.

Naomi appears at the edge of the stage, twirling her water bottle in one hand and nodding in the direction Madame Kuzmina has gone. "Such a ray of fucking sunshine," she deadpans.

Vaughn rolls onto his stomach. "And yet she loves me."

Brooklyn snorts. "She tolerates you."

Vaughn winks, pushing himself up. "Tolerates, loves, same difference."

I shake my head and turn toward the wings, heading for the dressing room. My legs ache, and even my skin feels tired. I need a hot shower and about fourteen hours of sleep.

The dressing room is empty, since the rehearsal day was done long ago. But Madame decided to focus her keen eye on Brooklyn, Vaughn, and I and had us stay late, since we're the ones performing the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*, which the Zakharova will be performing in a few months' time.

Naomi follows me in, already undoing her bun. She's our Odette/Odile, aka, Swan Queen, for the upcoming performance. And her reason for staying late has nothing to do with Madame Kuzmina and everything to do with *herself*.

No matter how many times you tell Naomi she's amazing, she refuses to listen. I swear, the girl drinks imposter syndrome smoothies for breakfast.

"Tell me you're coming out with us this weekend," she coaxes, leaning against her locker. "Or are you going to pretend you have an exciting social life when we both know you don't?"

I smirk. "Tempting, but I need sleep more than overpriced cocktails."

As if I could *afford* overpriced cocktails. Or reasonably priced ones. Actually, even happy hour pricing might be off the table given my current financial situation.

Naomi groans. "You're such a grandma."

Brooklyn drops onto the bench beside me. "I might actually be dead by the weekend," she mutters. "Kuzmina is a fucking sadist."

"I think the word you're looking for is *Russian*." Naomi grins.

Vaughn appears in the doorway, shoving his fingers through his shaggy dark hair. "Personally, I like my women with a touch of organized crime."

Brooklyn makes a face. “You would. And get *out*, dude. Guys' dressing room is down the hall, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“But I get so lonely all by myself.” He grins smugly before he peels off his t-shirt and slings it over his shoulder.

Vaughn has the sort of body that can only be described as “sinful”. The motherfucker has like zero percent body fat, is freaking *ripped*, and is covered in strategically placed tattoos. Coupled with his Mediterranean skin tone and vaguely Italian looks, it’s easy to see why his social calendar is perpetually filled—with dates with both sexes, I should add.

Vaughn strolls over to a locker and opens it before he turns to wink at Brooklyn. “You know I keep a second locker with my shit in here. And relax, it’s not like any of you are my type.”

He starts to take off his tights. Yeah, that’s my cue to turn around and avert my eyes. Sinful body or not, Vaughn's and my relationship—pretty much his relationship with any of the girls in the company—is more sibling-like than anything else.

Brooklyn snorts as she peels off her own tights and leotard and replaces them with underwear and yoga pants.

“I thought that your ‘type’ was ‘has a pulse and at least one willing hole’.”

“Pulses are overrated,” he grins.

“*Dude*,” Brooklyn makes sour face and shakes her head.

Vaughn laughs as he turns around, now at least wearing boxers. “Like you’d ever let me near you, baby girl.”

Brooklyn wrinkles her nose as she tosses on a hoodie. “Gross?”

Vaughn shrugs. “The feeling is mutual, and I say that with love. No, what I mean is, I don’t play hard to get. If someone doesn’t want me, I’m already gone. You want this…?”

The three of us collectively roll our eyes as he runs a finger down his ludicrously defined abs and cups his dick through his boxers.

“You have to show me you want it.”

“Yeah, hard pass, *friendo*,” Brooklyn says dryly.

“Again, the feeling is entirely mutual, baby girl.”

I giggle, turning to haul my dance bag out of my locker. I wriggle out of my leotard and wrap a towel around myself getting ready to shower, then dig through the bag, fingers searching for my MetroCard. But all I find are a few loose quarters and a crumpled one-dollar bill.

Shit. Not enough for the subway home.

I press my lips together and force the knot of frustration down.

I reach for my water bottle, catching my reflection in the mirror hanging on the inside of the locker door. My brow furrows, my gaze lingering on the way my collarbones are more prominent than they were a few months ago.

“Here.”

I jolt, turning at the sound of Naomi’s voice. She doesn’t make a big deal out of it, but passes me a granola bar.

“I’m good.”

My friend cocks one brow. “I don’t want it,” she says evenly. “So—take it.” Her eyes stay on mine. “And *eat it*,” she adds quietly.

I smile wryly as I peel open the wrapper, taking a small nibble. Naomi doesn’t know everything about my life, but she knows enough to see when things are…slipping.

Like me, Naomi is making it work by herself on her dancer's salary, somehow. The difference is, she’s got a safety net if she *really* needs it. You’d have to stick a gun to her head before she'd call her congressman father to ask for help. But the option is there.

For me, it's not. My safety net was gone long before the monster who was my father bled out in a prison cell.

Brooklyn and Vaughn are talking loudly about Kir Nikolayev, the very enigmatic Bratva kingpin who owns and bankrolls the Zakharova Ballet…specifically, how "fuckable" he is…when Naomi and I leave them and trudge to the showers.

The ache of the extra-long day melts just a little as the hot water pours down over me.

"Hey… You're good, right?"

I turn to glance over at Naomi, who's rinsing off at the next showerhead.

I know what she means.

"Yeah, I'm…fine."

She pushes her long, dark hair out of her face and gives me a piercing look. "For real?"

I exhale. "Yeah, it's just…" I shake my head. "I'm starting to wonder if school on top of this is too much."

Between the credits I got for advanced classes in high school, and the college courses I took a few years ago, I'm about two-thirds of the way to a degree in human psychology. The lofty goal is that when ballet eventually ends—whenever that is—I'll try my luck at the MCATs and med school, and try to become a clinical psychiatrist.

Hey, I *did* say "lofty".

Naomi exhales as she turns to rinse off her back. "Yeah, pre-med *does* sound like a lot on top of this, even part time." She glances at me, her brow still cocked. "Is that all?"

Goddammit, this girl always sees right through me.

"Vera's been gambling again."

She groans. "Are you fucking serious? I thought your mom was banned from every casino and racetrack in the state."

"Yeah, well, she must've found *someone* who lets her place bets through them."

"Shit." Naomi frowns. "Look, I know you hate—"

"We'll be fine," I smile as I turn the water off. "But thanks for the offer."

She nods, not pushing it.

Vaughn and Brooklyn are already dressed and somehow *still* talking about Kir's "big dick energy" when we get back from the showers. I pull on yoga pants and a hoodie before I remember the lack of means to get home tonight. I wince as I glance at Naomi.

"Hey, you wouldn't have a spare MetroCard on you, would you?"

Naomi's eyes flick toward my bag, where the pitiful collection of change still sits in the front pocket. She doesn't comment on it, just reaches into her wallet and pulls out her MetroCard, pressing it into my palm.

"Just take it. I'll grab a cab with Vaughn."

"Are you sure?"

She snorts. "Yeah, because I *love* the subway at midnight." She shoulders her dance bag and gives me a pointed look. "Text me when you get home, please."

Vaughn stretches dramatically, slinging an arm around Naomi's shoulders as he leads her toward the door. "My chariot awaits, milady." He sticks a cigarette between his lips, making Naomi squint.

"You light that thing anywhere near me and I'm going to knee you in the balls."

"Don't threaten me with a good time, girl."

The door swings shut behind them, leaving only silence.

Brooklyn is still sitting on the bench, one leg tucked under her, absentmindedly running a finger over the edge of her pointe shoe ribbon. The tension in her body from the exhausting rehearsal has shifted to something else.

She doesn't look at me when she finally speaks.

"You ever think about how much this actually costs us?"

I frown as I throw my gingery-red hair into a messy bun. "What? Ballet?"

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. "Not just ballet. This life. The work, all the training, the barely-there paycheck." She glances at me, one brow lifting. "We kill ourselves every day for what? The honor of being underpaid and having a career that's over before it's even begun?"

Brooklyn's like me: making her dance dream work on her own. No safety net.

I don't answer right away. Truth is, I have thought about it. Every single time I pull together enough cash for rent but not groceries. Every time I ache all over but know I'll still be back at the barre the next morning.

Brooklyn clears her throat. "Look, I understand pride, Lyra. And I'm not going to insult you by asking if you want a loan or anything. But…" The corners of her lips curl as she reaches into her bag.

My jaw drops as she pulls out a *gangster*-sized wad of cash.

"If you *do* need money…"

I blink at the thick stack of crisp hundreds, folded neatly. More cash than I've seen in…ever.

"What the fuck, Brooklyn?"

She smirks. "Relax. I didn't rob a bank."

I tear my gaze away from the money, forcing my voice to stay level. "Then where…?"

She exhales slowly. "Remember that charity thing where we did that excerpt from *Giselle* last month?"

Occasionally, mostly because it *always* results in new benefactors with deep pockets, select members of the company will perform at things like the Policemen's Ball or other charity events.

Brooklyn clears her throat. "Well, after we were done, this guy came up to me and said he had a dance gig I might be interested in. He said he couldn't tell me much about it, but that it paid insanely well. And… I took it. That's where this money came from."

A strange prickle works its way down my spine.

Brooklyn must notice the change on my face, because she quickly shakes her head. "Look, it's not stripping or anything. No one touches you—no one even speaks to you. And you're wearing clothes. But it pays way better than this." She gestures vaguely around us at the dressing room. "It's also secret."

The word makes something inside me tighten.

Secret is never good. Secret always comes at a price.

"What do you mean, *secret*?"

Brooklyn twists the ends of her hoodie strings around her finger. "It's like a private club or something. They pick you up at a location they decide, blindfold you, and drive you there."

My jaw drops.

"Are you fucking serious? Brooklyn, that's super sketch!"

She huffs a quiet laugh. "Yeah, I thought so too, at first."

I narrow my eyes. "*At first*?"

She shrugs. "It wasn't as bad as I thought. You change in a dressing room, where the blindfold comes off. There were six other girls—all dancers."

"And then?"

Brooklyn exhales, her voice quieter now. “They give us fresh blindfolds, masks, and earbuds that play music synced with a voice directing us. Someone took us all out to a performance space, and—we danced.”

I don’t like how that makes my skin prickle.

“For how many people?”

She shakes her head. “No idea. I never saw them. Never heard them. But they were there, I could feel it.”

I swallow thickly.

What the fuck.

She holds up the wad of money, her brow cocking significantly. “Lyra, they pay five fucking grand for *four hours*.”

My stomach lurches.

Five. Thousand. Dollars.

That’s rent, food, security. That’s a way out from the hole my mother seems to be completely hellbent on in digging us into.

Brooklyn watches me carefully. “Listen… again, I get pride, Lyra. But I saw you counting coins…” She lifts her shoulders. “They said they might be looking for more dancers. So if you wanted…”

I shiver, feeling the invitation linger between us like a lit fuse. I swallow, eying the money in her hand.

“Look, for now…” She hands me two twenties. “Will you just take a cab home? Seriously, the subway is dangerous this late. Please? And if you’re interested in the job… Here's the number for my contact.” She finds an entry on her phone and texts it to me.

Pride wants me to refuse the money politely.

Common sense and the prospect of spending hours underground with my fingers wrapped around my keys wins out.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, taking the money. “Seriously, thank you. I’ll pay you back.”

* * *

The night air is crisp, biting at my skin as I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

“Wanna just share my Uber?” Brooklyn nods at the car waiting at the top of the alley behind the theater.

I exhale. “Maybe, actually.” I shoot her a wry smile. “I feel like you’re pampering me tonight.”

She giggles. “I mean, *yeah*. You’re my girl. C’mon.”

I start to follow her. When I slip my hand into my hoodie pocket, I groan.

“Shit.”

Brooklyn glances back. “What’s up?”

My face droops. “I left my phone in the dressing room.” I shake my head. “You know what? Go ahead. You already gave me money for a cab. I’ll just do that.”

She frowns. “Don’t be silly. I’ll wait for you.”

“Nah, go get your ride. It’s late. But thanks. And…for earlier.”

“Anytime, girl. See you tomorrow for more Russian gulag conditioning?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I groan.

I watch as she tugs her coat around herself, scampers up the alley, and slips into the waiting vehicle, red taillights disappearing into the night.

The door hisses shut behind me as I duck back into the warmth of the dim, silent ballet theater. My steps are quick as I make my way toward the dressing room.

It only takes a minute to find my phone and I stuff it into my hoodie pocket, shaking my head before slipping back outside.

This time, the door clicks shut behind me with finality.

The street is mostly empty now, the occasional honk of a distant car the only sound. The alley behind the Mercury splits halfway up to the street: continuing straight puts you onto Madison Avenue, which runs one-way north: perfect for Brooklyn, who lives up toward Harlem. But if I take the left-handed side-cut out of the alley, it'll dump me on East 49th Street, where it's easier to get a cab going *downtown*, to the apartment I, unfortunately, share with my mother in Hell's Kitchen.

I ignore the creepy sensation that being here at midnight always brings as I hustle up the alley. I'm just about to turn the corner and head out to East 49th when I hear voices.

Low. Rough. Male.

I freeze.

The words are hushed, but I can still hear them. A weird shiver ripples up my spine as I do.

"What are you doing here? Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago."

The first voice is rough-sounding, deep, and somewhat frightening, with a dangerous edge to it.

My stomach knots at Bianca's name.

Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.

Bianca as in Bianca Barone—well, Bianca *Drakos* now that she's married—who's in the Zakharova with me. She's an *incredible* dancer, super sweet, and is the youngest daughter in the Barone Italian mafia family.

I suck in a breath, pressing my back against the brick wall, forcing myself deeper into the shadows.

"No shit. I'm not here for her," a second man growls. "What are *you* doing here, you psycho?" His voice is deep and dark, too, but also edged in something savage and viciously alluring, like a blade dragging down my spine or a dark promise whispered in my ear.

The first guy exhales sharply, irritated. "It was stupid and reckless for Matteo to hire her."

My pulse hammers.

Her who?

"She dances *here*," the first guy growls. "She's friends with people like your sister. She could talk—"

"She was blindfolded, you dumb fuck," the second man snaps. "And just what was your plan, exactly?"

The first man huffs out a breath. "I was just going to scare her a little," he rumbles. "Remind her that the money she was paid ensures silence."

Something inside me goes cold as things fall into place. I'm pretty sure they're talking about *Brooklyn.*

The second man's voice sharpens. "Stay the fuck away from where my sister dances, understand?"

There's a tense, prolonged pause.

"Fine." A slow exhale, like a forced truce.

"Is that a *yes* fine, or an *I'm blowing smoke up your ass* fine."

"It's a yes fine, calm down," the first guy grunts. "Anyway, in unrelated news, Mushkin hasn't responded to our summons."

The second guy—the one with authority in his voice, the one who's driving the conversation—lets out a dark chuckle. "People rarely actually respond to a Black Court summons."

I shrink further against the wall.

"They respond in behavior, at least," the first guy mutters. "Mushkin hasn't hired more security, fled, moved money. None of it. His schedule is still clear for the night of the trial, though."

"You know how it is," the second guy says, his voice smoother now. "Sometimes they're so confident that they show up willingly."

The first guy laughs, low and dark. "And if not…" He pauses, amusement dripping from his voice. "Then we get the fun of hunting them down before we even get to the chase."

A slow shiver slides down my spine.

"Reach out to The Wolf and The Stag," the second man orders. "Let them know the status on Mushkin. The Black Court will meet as planned."

The Wolf? The Stag?

The *Black Court*?

Nothing about this conversation makes sense.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. They're splitting up. I panic, pressing myself deeper into the shadows, willing my body to melt into the cold brick.

Then I flinch, freezing in place as a figure rounds the corner and suddenly looms over me.

Tall. Menacing. Powerful.

Suddenly, I'm looking straight into the cold, piercing blue eyes of Carmine Barone.

My stomach drops.

I've seen him before—either dropping off or picking up Bianca, or sometimes at performances or some of those charity events. But this is different.

Up close, he's even more intense than he is at a distance. This near, he radiates raw power—and something darker, coiled beneath the surface, waiting to strike like a lethal, venomous snake. He's wearing a dark suit and an open pea-coat, molded to his broad shoulders and powerful arms like a suit of armor.

It's like black lightning striking from the shadows. Before I can even blink, his hand is suddenly on my throat, his fingers wrapping around it and settling against my jugular. It's not a choke—just a warning. A display of his strength. His power.

His control.

My breath catches.

"I—I didn't hear anything," I whisper, the words tumbling out too fast, too desperate.

His grip tightens slightly but he says nothing for a moment, those cold blue eyes piercing into me like knives, as if he's flaying open my very soul to peer inside and feast on what he finds.

His thumb traces over my pulse. "No one asked you about anything you may or may not have heard."

A tremor ripples through my body, my eyes widening even further.

"Who *are* you?" he finally murmurs darkly, his voice low, focused, and almost sensual in the way it teases over my skin.

My heart thunders in my chest and my throat works against his hand.

"N-nobody," I whisper again. "I'm nobody."

Carmine's lips curl, something between a smirk and a snarl.

"Nobody…" he muses.

His grip lingers, his fingers still firm around my throat, pressing just enough that I can feel the subtle pressure against my pulse. A test. A game.

A reminder that he could crush me if he wanted to.

His thumb moves slightly, stroking the base of my throat like he's considering something. My skin burns where he touches me, body locked in place, muscles coiled tight. I don't flinch. I don't dare.

His head tilts, studying me like I'm something strange and unexpected.

"What did you hear?" His voice is a low rasp.

I shake my head as much as his grip allows. "Nothing," I breathe.

Carmine hums, unconvinced. "Nothing?"

I gulp. "I-I was just leaving the theater. I didn't—I wasn't paying attention."

His grip tightens for a second, just enough to make my pulse spike against his hand before he eases up again. "Funny," he murmurs. "People who've heard nothing don't usually look this scared."

I open my mouth, then close it again, forcing my breathing to stay even. He's testing me, waiting to see if I'll break.

I can't do that.

Men like him eat weakness for breakfast.

My fingers clench into fists at my sides. "You… You startled me, is all."

"If this is *startled*, I'd love to see what it looks like when you're *truly* scared."

He says it like a desire. Like he's already thinking about getting off to the idea of my fear.

Carmine watches me for a beat longer. Then, finally, he lets go. I suck in a breath, my skin prickling where his hand was on my throat, the ghost of his touch lingering like a brand.

He takes a slow step back, his sharp blue gaze never leaving mine.

"Well, Miss Nobody who heard nothing," he murmurs, his lips curling into an amused and cruel almost-smile. "Let's hope it stays that way."

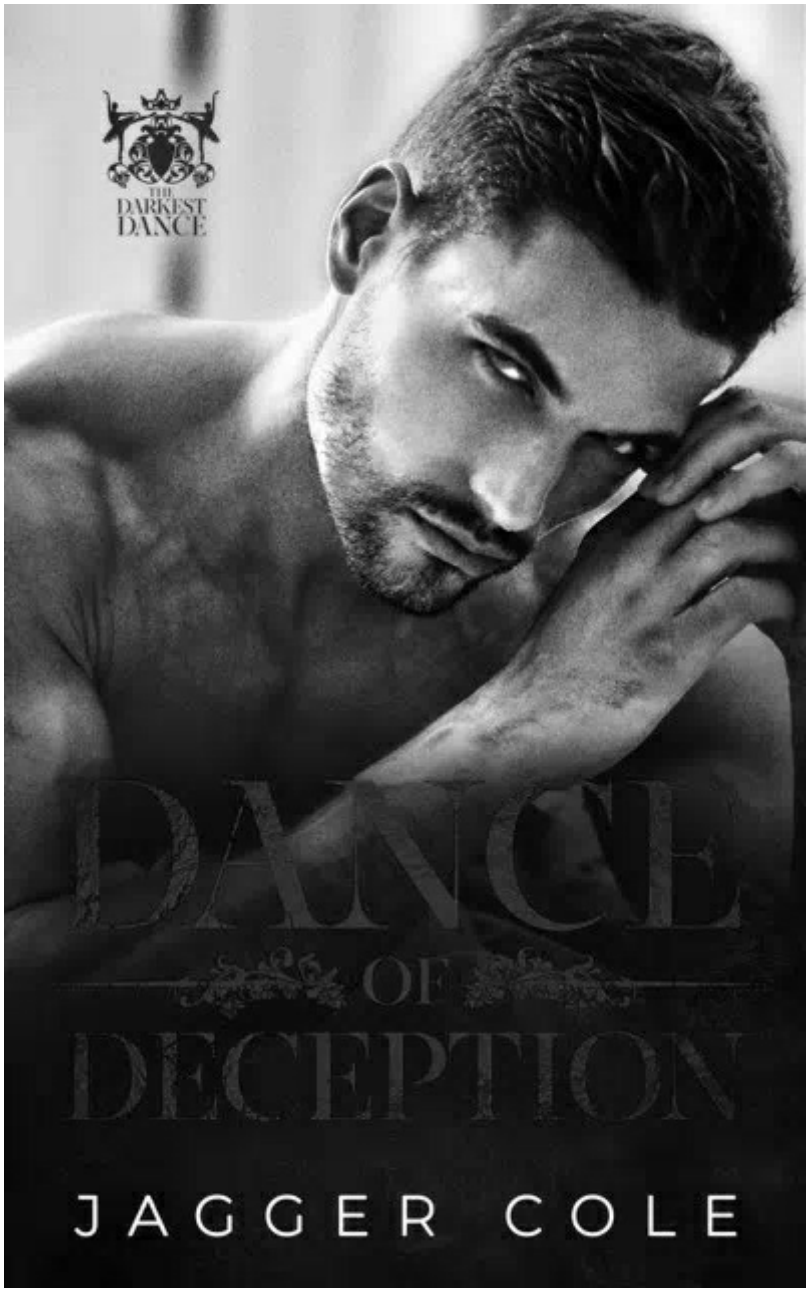
And then, just as quickly as he appeared, he's gone, and the alley is silent once more.

The air feels heavy, charged, like the ghost of him is still standing there, watching me.

I don't move. I don't breathe.

Then my legs finally unlock and I'm able to stumble forward, pulse still hammering, his words pressing heavily on my spine and dragging over my skin like hot knives.

Keep reading!



[Dance of Deception - Exclusively on Amazon and in Kindle Unlimited!]

* * *

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The Darkest Dance:

Dance of Deception

Dance of Ruin

Dance of Madness

Dance of Devils

Memento Mori:

Emperor of Wrath

Emperor of Rage

Emperor of Lust

Emperor of Havoc

Venomous Gods:

Toxic Love

Devious Vow

Poisonous Kiss

Corrupted Heart

Monstrous Urges

Dark Hearts:

Deviant Hearts

Vicious Hearts

Sinful Hearts

Twisted Hearts

Stolen Hearts

Reckless Hearts

Kings & Villains:

Dark Kingdom

Burned Cinder (Cinder Duet #1)

Empire of Ash (Cinder Duet #2)

The Hunter King (Hunted Duet # 1)

The Hunted Queen (Hunted Duet #2)

Prince of Hate

Savage Heirs:

Savage Heir

Dark Prince

Brutal King

Forbidden Crown

Broken God

Defiant Queen

Bratva's Claim:

Paying The Bratva's Debt

The Bratva's Stolen Bride

Hunted By The Bratva Beast

His Captive Bratva Princess

Owned By The Bratva King

The Bratva's Locked Up Love

The Scaliami Crime Family:

The Hitman’s Obsession

The Boss’s Temptation

The Bodyguard’s Weakness

Power:

Tyrant

Outlaw

Warlord

Standalones:

Broken Lines

Bosshole

Grumpaholic

Stalker of Mine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
www.jaggercolewrites.com